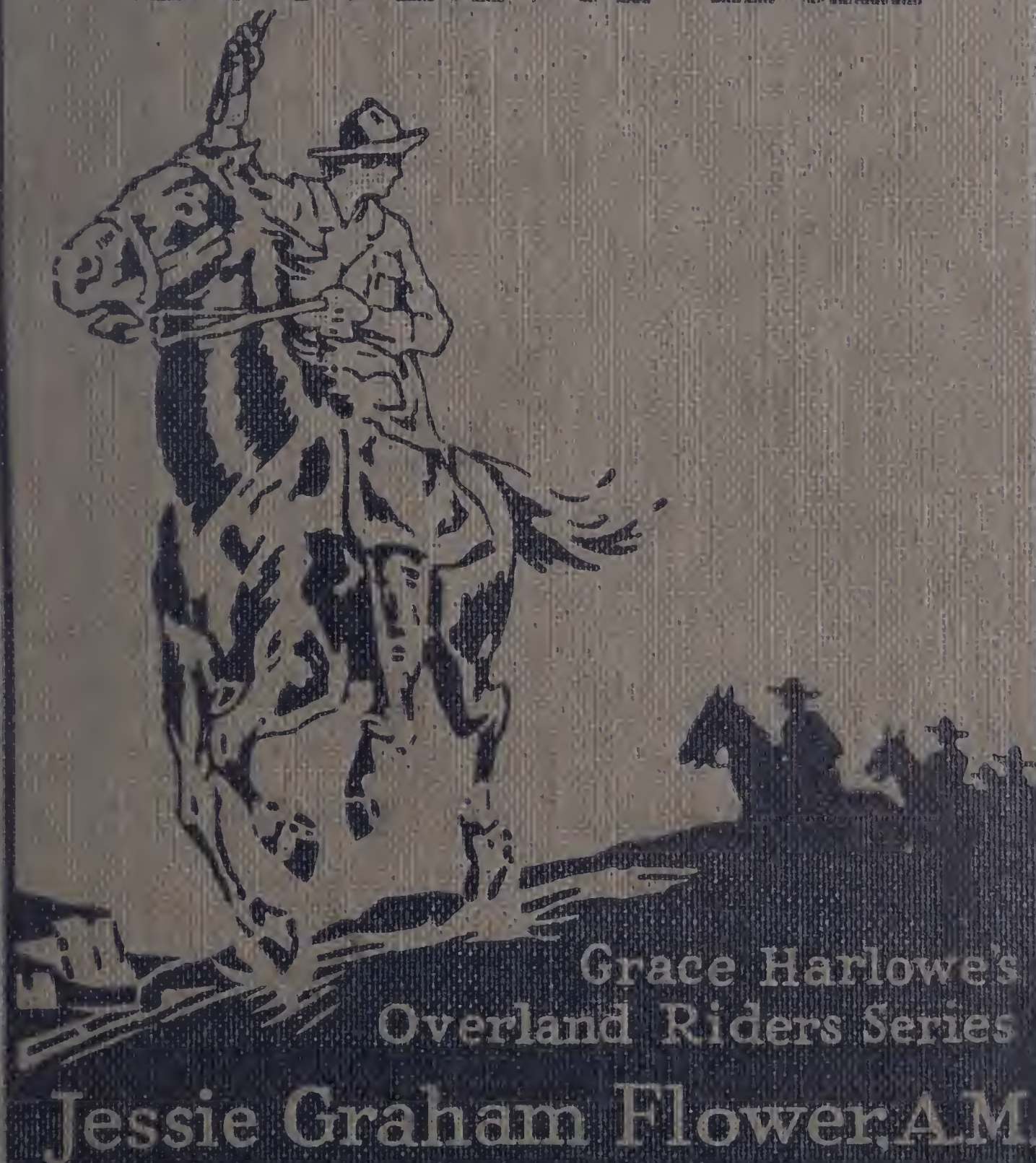


Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Lost River Trail



Grace Harlowe's
Overland Riders Series

Jessie Graham Flower A.M.



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Elfreda Darted Ahead.

Frontispiece.

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on the Lost River Trail

By

JESSIE GRAHAM FLOWER, A.M.

Author of The High School Girls Series, The College Girls Series, The
Grace Harlowe Overseas Series, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
on the Old Apache Trail, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders on
the Great American Desert, Grace Harlowe's Overland
Riders Among the Kentucky Mountaineers, Grace Har-
lowe's Overland Riders in the Great North Woods,
Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the High
Sierras, Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
in the Yellowstone National Park,
Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
in the Black Hills, Grace Har-
lowe's Overland Riders
Among the Border
Guerrillas, etc.,
etc.



Illustrated

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GRACE HARLOWE'S OVER- LAND RIDERS ON THE LOST RIVER TRAIL

CHAPTER I

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT

“**L**IEUTENANT! Lieutenant!”
“Eh? Wha—what is it?” muttered
Hippy Wingate, rousing himself from
a deep sleep.

“Listen, Lieutenant! There is peril in the air,” answered Ham White. “I don’t know where it is, but I do know there is trouble afoot, and that instant action is necessary. I don’t think it advisable to let the others of our party know, so long as there probably is no immediate danger.”

“Humph! You men of the forest make me weary. Everything is a mystery—a peril and so forth and so on. Ham, you’re a good fellow, but you remind me of Tom Gray—always looking for trouble. What is the big idea?”

Hamilton White placed his lips to Hippy's ear and whispered. A little distance from them the camp was sleeping soundly. Not a sound disturbed the forest night save the faint whisperings of the tree-tops and the occasional twitter of a bird high up among the branches.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Hippy, sitting up awake and thoroughly on the alert. "Are you positive?"

"Yes. It may be a matter of hours; then again minutes may cover the time."

"What shall we do?" questioned Hippy.

"Move at once," answered the guide with emphasis. "We will lay our course to the northeast and get as far away from here as possible in the shortest possible time. We've got to break camp now, Lieutenant!"

Hippy Wingate sprang to his feet and began dressing. While doing so he asked how they were to explain their hurried departure to the others of the party, unless the whole truth were told. White said he would attend to that.

Hippy shook his head.

"Ham, you have the Overland Riders sized up wrong. They aren't tenderfeet, not by a long shot, nor are they shying at danger any more than you are," declared Hippy with some heat.

“Turn them out!” ordered Ham. “We can’t afford to waste a moment.”

“All right, Buddy, I’ll turn them out. You will have to do the rest, though. Turn out, you sleepy-heads!” roared Hippy.

The response was almost instantaneous. The Overland Riders bounced out of their tents, rubbing their eyes, staggering a little, for they were not yet fully awake, and demanding to know what had happened. Ham White, who was already engaged in packing their belongings, paused long enough to reply.

“Folks, we must break camp and get out of this right smart,” he informed them.

“What! Lose my night’s sleep?” wailed Stacy Brown. “Move if you wish, but I stay right here until after breakfast, then I’ll think about seeking new and more beautiful scenes.”

“Mr. White, will you please tell me why we must break camp at this hour of the night?” begged Grace Harlowe, stepping over to the guide, and looking up into his face. “What is it? I know you must have good reason or—”

“Because, Mrs. Gray, some trouble has developed in the woods, and we are exposed to it. I don’t wish to alarm you, and for that reason I can’t explain just now, so please trust to me and don’t urge me to give my reasons,” answered the guide, resuming his work.

Grace directed a quick glance at the sky, and Elfreda Briggs, now at her side, did likewise. The stars were clear white, and a light breeze was stirring the tops of the big pine trees.

“Grace, what do you make of it?” questioned Miss Briggs.

“Nothing, J. Elfreda. Mr. White is an experienced guide, so let’s hustle and pack for a move.”

Emma Dean, who had dressed hurriedly, was now importuning the guide to tell her what it was he feared.

“If you will only tell me, I will demonstrate over it, and you will see how quickly the danger, or whatever it may be, will pass,” she said.

“Pardon me, Miss Dean, I am too busy to talk. Please get yourself ready for riding as quickly as possible,” replied Mr. White.

“Oh, very well!” Emma elevated her chin and walked away.

“Go on! Demonstrate! I know Ham is willing to try most anything once,” urged Stacy Brown.

“If Mr. White tried you once, I am quite certain a second trial would be unnecessary, Stacy,” retorted Emma.

“Wow!” muttered Stacy.

“If my Hippy says it is all right I am sat-

isfied," spoke up Nora Wingate, giving Hippy a playful pat as he passed her.

"How demonstrate?" wondered Hippy. "Is this another of your fads? You have been 'concentrating,' 'reading nature,' and doing goodness knows how many other crazy things, on several recent journeys."

"Mine is not a fad, Hippy," replied Emma with dignity. "What you call 'fads' are simply demonstrations of Truth."

"Such as Arline Thayer put over on you last year," chuckled Stacy Brown, to which Miss Dean deigned no reply.

"It is too bad that poor Arline's health will not permit her being with us this year," murmured Grace.

"Demonstrating," resumed Emma thoughtfully, "is to breathe in harmony, permitting no inharmonious thoughts to enter your being."

"Meaning what?" persisted Hippy Wingate teasingly.

"Meaning, sir, that if you will think hard in the right way, believing with all your might that certain things will come out as you wish them to, you will find that they will."

"Good! I'll just demonstrate a million dollars into my pocket between now and morning," promised Stacy.

Hamilton White gave the Overlanders a

quick glance of appraisal, and nodded to himself. He admitted that perhaps he had not at first formed the proper estimate of the party he was guiding through the forests and mountains of the rugged state of Washington. All hands, with the possible exception of Stacy, began work, and in less than an hour the camp had been struck and the equipment loaded on the ponies, the embers of the cook fire having been well soaked with water.

The girls of the party were still trying to solve the mystery of their hurried departure as they mounted and started away with Mr. White in the lead. They soon found themselves too fully occupied to give thought to anything other than to dodging trees and low-hanging limbs, for the forest was very dark. Hippy Wingate brought up the rear, Stacy Brown in the middle of the line of riders, grumbling and complaining with every jolt of the pony, now and then dozing off in his saddle but suddenly awakening as a tree-trunk scraped his shin or a bough smote him in the face.

After an hour of uncomfortable riding the guide called a halt, and, strapping on his climbers, began climbing a tree. He was out of sight in a few seconds. In the meantime, Grace, gazing up to the skies, noticed that the stars had now lost their whiteness and had

taken on a faded tint. This puzzled her. She did not know how to interpret the change, unless, perhaps, it was caused by fog.

“Did you solve the mystery, Mr. White?” called Emma in her sweetest voice as the guide stepped to the ground and began removing his climbers, for Emma had already attached herself to Hamilton White as a man worth while. “What did you discover?”

“Principally atmosphere, Miss Dean,” was the noncommittal reply.

“I think you are real mean,” pouted Emma. “I am angry with you. Some persons think it is clever to make a mystery of everything, and—”

“Oh, demonstrate over it,” advised Stacy wearily. “It’s only light-headed persons who thus reason.”

“Indeed! That accounts for some of your peculiarities,” Emma came back quickly. By this time the Overlanders were laughing over the sparring of Emma Dean and Stacy Brown.

“Please get under way,” directed the guide, vaulting into his saddle. Grace and Elfreda took up positions behind him, and the journey through the somber forest again began. It continued on until about an hour before day-break, when, in the faint light, the two girls observed the guide moisten a finger on his lips

and hold it up, slowly turning the finger from side to side.

Grace wondered, and did the same several times, observed questioningly by her companion.

“What is it?” whispered Miss Briggs.

“I—I’m not certain,” answered Grace a little lamely.

“This suspense is killing me,” cried Emma, joining the two girls. “Unless my curiosity is gratified, I surely shall expire.”

“Why don’t you do what you threatened to do, demonstrate over the situation?” demanded Elfreda laughingly.

“Hamilton doesn’t like me to,” returned Miss Dean flushing.

“So? That is the way the wind blows,” chuckled Elfreda, and the girls laughed heartily.

“Hamilton!” murmured Grace. “It seems to me that matters are progressing rather rapidly, Emma dear. Here we have been out less than two days on our annual vacation in the saddle, and you are calling our handsome guide by his first name. I am amazed at you. I—”

Ham White threw up a hand as a signal that they were to halt. Day was dawning, and the waving plumes of the tall pines were now quite plainly visible from below.

“Stop here and take a light breakfast. Better not unpack anything. I will be back in a few minutes,” said the guide. “These are orders,” he flung back over his shoulder as he rode rapidly away.

“It seems to me that our guide is rather bossy,” observed Nora Wingate.

“He isn’t!” protested Emma indignantly. “He is the finest man I ever knew.”

The others looked at each other and burst out laughing; then they began teasing Emma as they ate breakfast standing beside their ponies. Mr. White returned ere they had finished their light meal. A quick, comprehensive glance showed him that his orders had been obeyed.

“You people think me an alarmist, I know, but the fact is I did not wish to alarm you until I was certain. Now that I have been able to get a clear observation, I know.”

“The worst is yet to come,” grumbled Stacy.

“Yes. You always bring this outfit bad luck,” retorted Emma.

“Please, please, children!” begged Grace.

“What is it, Mr. White?”

“We are in the direct path of a forest fire!”

There followed a moment’s silence, then Hippy spoke up.

“What is the chance of our getting away from it?” he asked.

“I am coming to that, and—”

“Then the question seems to be, how much time have we to get out of the way of this fire?” questioned Grace.

The guide said that neither he nor any one else could answer that question.

“A forest fire is a sneaking demon,” he declared. “Sometimes one sees no fire at all, then again it seems as if the whole universe were ablaze. As a rule, persons who are caught in forest fires never realize it until the fire has leaped upon them. This fire, so far, is the kind you do see. Look up!”

All eyes were turned upwards. They saw that the sky was covered with a yellow haze. The haze seemed low. Birds were winging their way northward, flying swiftly, and there were rustlings farther out in the forest, and sounds of unseen creatures hurrying.

“I wish Tom were here,” breathed Grace. Tom Gray, her much-loved husband, now a well-known forestry engineer, was somewhere off in that vast forest, making a survey for the government. Grace uttered a fervent prayer for his safety.

“I believe the fire is still some hours away, but the breeze is in our direction, and bids fair to hold all day. By striking off to the eastward and making good time, we have an excellent

chance of getting to higher rocky ground where we shall probably be safe," was the guide's prediction.

"*Alors!* Let's go," urged J. Elfreda Briggs, with a touch of her old-time lightness of spirit.

"That is what I am getting at. I can direct you so that you folks ought to make it, but I dislike leaving you," added Mr. White.

"Leaving us!" exclaimed Emma.

"Yes. More than half a day's ride from here is a village, a forest mountain village, with women and children, who, perhaps, will never know their peril until too late. It is known as Silver Creek, named from the stream that flows through it, a stream that for about half of the year is a swollen torrent—water icy cold, coming from the mountain peaks in the north. In any event, they will need help, and it is my duty to get there as quickly as possible. Lieutenant, will you take it upon yourself to lead your party to safety, and let me go on?"

"That—that is for the girls to answer," replied Hippy gravely, turning to Grace and her companions.

"Help will be needed at Silver Creek, you think, Mr. White?" questioned Grace.

"Yes. All they can get."

"Girls, I think we, too, know where our duty lies, do we not?" she asked evenly.

“Yes!” was the quick reply from Elfreda and Nora and Emma.

“We are going with you, Mr. White,” announced Grace.

“Oh, help!” wailed Stacy.

A moment later the Overland party was riding at top speed, following closely on the heels of the guide’s pony, knowing that upon their speed in reaching their destination many lives might depend.

CHAPTER II

IN THE DEMON'S GRIP

“**W**HEW! The weather is getting hotter and hotter up here!” exclaimed Stacy, fanning himself with his sombrero as they trotted along. “Does it always get this way up here?”

“Sometimes,” answered the guide, with a grim smile.

The others of the party, who saw the smile understood.

“Hamilton, you don’t mean it is the heat coming from the forest that we feel, do you?” questioned Miss Dean.

The guide nodded and urged his pony ahead at a more rapid pace. The others were keeping up a continual chatter, laughing and joking, and Ham White wondered if they fully realized the peril that was stalking them. Mr. White did not yet know the young people he was guiding. Nor did they know him, which fact Elfreda Briggs voiced when she spoke to Grace on the subject as they were jogging along.

“There is something about Mr. White that I can’t interpret,” she said.

“And that is?” demanded Grace, regarding her companion with twinkling eyes.

“That is just it; I don’t know. I do know that Emma has an awful crush on him, though I am positive that Mr. White doesn’t know it.”

“It is nothing new with Emma, is it?” answered Grace laughingly. “Let me see, how many men has the dear girl been in love with since we went to France for war work with our college unit?”

“Oh, I lost the count a long time ago. What is that?”

“Snow. Look at the snow!” shouted Stacy, pointing to a shower of white flakes that was sifting down over them.

“Oh, it can’t be possible!” wondered Nora Wingate.

“Yes, snow, and the temperature a hundred in the shade,” declared Stacy. “This is a fine climate. I feel cooler just at sight of those beautiful white flakes.”

“What is it, Ham?” called Hippy.

“Ashes!” answered the guide. “Ride hard!”

The Overlanders understood now. It was ashes from the forest fire that was following on their trail, and no further urging was neces-

sary to keep them going as fast as they could force their horses. In a short time they were free from the feathery shower and the air seemed fresher, though they occasionally caught a faint odor of smoke. The Overlanders felt a certain relief, believing that they had thrown off their pursuer, but Hamilton White felt no such assurance. That taint of smoke told him more than the shower of ashes had told him. It meant that the fire was creeping rather than blazing high, and he knew that a creeping forest fire was a much to be dreaded enemy. One never knew when or where to look for it, and it had an uncanny habit of swooping down on one when least looked for, and devouring. Ham increased his pace.

No stop had been made in that long ride, except once to let the sweating ponies drink from a cold mountain stream, and about mid-afternoon the guide called back that they were nearing Silver Creek village. The party caught their first glance at the creek, whose shining surface indicated that it had been well named. It was silvery, but ere they had followed it long, little waves of mud-colored water were leaping up.

There had been a severe storm in the mountains within a day, and the flood was pouring down on its way to the lowlands. It was soon

roaring so loudly that they had to shout to make themselves heard.

Then the village suddenly burst upon them, a settlement of several hundred people, with stores and a post office that got its mail twice a week by a post rider.

The party of riders as they entered the village attracted the entire attention of the inhabitants, who gathered about, and regarded the newcomers closely.

“Got anything to eat in this burg?” demanded Stacy Brown, slipping from his saddle and grinning at the villagers.

“Reckon ye can git something at the store,” answered someone.

“Then me for the store!”

Stacy left his pony and ambled into the general store, where Ham White and Hippy already had gone. White was just greeting the postmaster, who owned the place, as Stacy entered.

“Forest fire?” jeered the postmaster, in reply to the guide’s warning. “Never had any such thing at Silver Creek—never expect to. Creek yonder will stop any forest fire that ever sprung a spark. Look at it! Listen to it! I reckon you’ve—”

“Stop it!” commanded White sternly. “I demand the help of the villagers, and if they

don't make haste this town will be wiped out before they get started."

Stacy helped himself liberally from the cracker barrel, listening wide-eyed to the conversation. So long as the crackers held out he was well satisfied to have the men talk and keep the storekeeper occupied.

"Who be ye?" demanded the man.

"I am the guide of this party, and—" Ham whispered to the storekeeper.

"Eh? Oh, well, if that's the case I reckon we've got to go through the motions of stopping a fire that ain't. What do ye propose to do?"

"Call these people together and tell them to get their axes and begin to fell trees around the village. I will tell them which ones to cut. Then I want them to help us backfire the grass around the village; get out every pail and pan in the place. If there are any barrels here, fill them with water. Cut boughs to whip out the fire and keep it from getting away from us while we are backfiring. My party will help. Have you seen any rangers here within a day or so?"

"No. Bud Carver was passing through about a week ago, and he said—"

"Never mind what he said. Get out and tell those people what they are to do—"

White was interrupted by a growl from the storekeeper, who had grabbed Stacy by the collar and separated him from the cracker barrel.

“Here, ye young thief—”

“Don’t you call me a thief!” protested Stacy. “I am paying for what I get. I’d have paid in advance, but you were busy and I didn’t want to interrupt you,” explained the fat boy lamely. “Here’s five cents, and that is more than the whole barrel is worth. I’ll bet you have had them here ever since Washington stopped being a territory—in name.”

Uttering a growl, the storekeeper stalked out to the porch and waved the people to him. Hippy Wingate grasped Stacy by an arm and propelled him from the store.

“It is fortunate for you, young man, that there was nothing to eat in the postoffice part of the place, or you would have helped yourself and got in trouble with the United States Government,” declared Hippy.

The others of the party had led their ponies up to the porch and were standing beside them, waiting for orders from the guide, each one listening attentively while the storekeeper told the villagers what Hamilton White had directed him to say.

A loud laugh followed the remarks.

“Ain’t goin’ to burn no grass ’round here!

That's stock grass fer the cows and the hosses next winter," warned one.

"The grass is going to be burned, and if you don't do it we shall do it ourselves. If we fail, the forest fire will do it and take in the village at the same time," warned the guide.

"Show me a forest fire and I'll think about it," demanded the man.

"You have a nose. Can't you smell it?" retorted Hippy Wingate.

The villager laughed.

"That smoke is from a bush fire on Bald Mountain where a feller is clearing a pa'cel of ground fer a cabin," jeered the villager.

"The breeze doesn't happen to be blowing from the direction of Bald Mountain, my man," reminded White. "It is coming from the opposite direction. If you will use your brains, provided you have any, you will find that the air from the south on your face is hotter by several degrees than it is from the other direction. Get your axes and the other things that Mr. Skinner has for us."

Still unconvinced, the man shook his head, and refused.

"Tie your horses, Overlanders! We will backfire ourselves," called White.

"Ye'll get a charge of buckshot in yer carcass if ye do!" threatened the mountaineer.

“Try it!” suggested Ham White, giving the man a long, steady look in the eyes. The protesting villager melted away.

At White’s direction, the storekeeper got out all the pails in his store, which, together with axes and grub-hoes, were cast out on the porch.

“You ladies must keep back out of the way,” directed Ham.

“We shall do our part, Mr. White,” answered Grace. “Give us something to do.”

“Very well,” answered the guide after slight hesitation. “You may fill all these pails with water and distribute them along the edge of the village on the north side.”

Boughs, green and tough, were quickly cut by White, who then directed Hippy to start backfiring, which means firing towards the approaching forest fire, the start of which is always a risk—the risk of its getting away and burning that which the fire fighters are seeking to protect. Only a small section at the edge of the forest was fired at first, Ham White standing guard with Stacy, ready to leap to the danger point if a blaze should begin creeping towards the village.

Not a villager lifted a hand to assist, but loud protests were voiced when the pungent smoke from the burning grass settled over them.

“You will be in luck if you swallow nothing worse than smoke,” Ham White flung back at them.

There was something in this lithe, upstanding man of the forest that held the villagers back from taking matters into their own hands and driving the intruders from the place. He was everywhere, directing Hippy where to fire, advising the girls where to pour water, prodding Stacy Brown to keep that worthy from sitting down and shirking his share of the labor.

Perspiration was standing out on every face, and every face was red from the heat of the flames that were rapidly eating their way towards the big trees in the background. Ham White wanted to fell those trees, but he could not do it alone, nor would the villagers do it for him, so he did what could be done, and was glad that he had such ready workers as the Overland Riders proved themselves to be. They were resourceful, too, and soon understanding what the guide was seeking to accomplish, went to it without further instruction.

“Miss Briggs!” he called, and Elfreda was at his side in a moment.

“What is it, Mr. White?”

“You are a level-headed woman—”

“Thank you,” answered Elfreda smilingly,

mopping the perspiration on her face into sooty streaks.

“I wish you would go around the right-hand side of this burn. The smoke is blowing towards us now, so you will get little odor from it. Go into the forest a little way and watch and listen and sniff. Watch the ground, not the skies. Any indications of fire that you discover, hear or smell, let me know instantly.”

“Thank you, Mr. White. Carrying water is not particularly inspiring. I am glad to do something that will occupy me more absorbingly. How shall I get back here if you fire the right-hand side you just mentioned?”

“This side will be burned off by then, but don’t stand in one spot many seconds at a time when crossing it. You might burn your feet. Be careful that you don’t get lost. I trust you to take care of yourself.”

For a few brief seconds they held each other’s eyes, then Elfreda turned and walked briskly away.

“Please, Hamilton, won’t you come back out of danger,” begged Emma, slipping an arm through his at this juncture. “I am terribly nervous, but I am demonstrating for you with every fiber of my being.”

“Go demonstrate on the villagers—do something worth while,” advised Stacy sourly.

“I will after this is finished—I’ll demonstrate over you,” retorted Emma.

The guide made no reply, but turned back to his work. Elfreda had already disappeared from sight. Hers was a responsible post, and none knew that so well as Hamilton White himself, though Elfreda began to realize it when she found herself alone in the forest. With every sense on the alert, Elfreda devoted herself to following Mr. White’s instructions. She could catch faint whiffs of smoke from the south, but could see no fire. At first, she thought the odor was from their own backfire, but after a little she was able to distinguish a difference in the odor coming from the south. It was more pungent, more overpowering, seeming to possess more substance, more body, than did the faint smoke from the grass fire that reached her nostrils.

“I wonder if I had better run back and report? No. I will stay here until I have something definite. I may be imagining.”

Elfreda was now so far back in the forest that she could not hear the crackling of the grass backfire that Ham White had started, and she could but faintly hear the flow of Silver Creek. Soon a few scattering “snowflakes” began falling about her, and from the previous experience she knew what these

meant. There was fire to the south, though it might be many miles away. Elfreda was not sufficiently familiar with forest fires to interpret these indications with certainty.

A low, rumbling noise, that might have been distant thunder, caused her to listen attentively.

“It might have been a train,” she murmured, then instantly recalled that there was no railway within fifty miles.

A breeze sprang up from the south and the tops of the trees bent under it ever so little. Then suddenly Elfreda Briggs witnessed a sight that, for the instant, paralyzed her—that prevented her from moving a muscle.

What, at first sight, looked to be a shining serpent, was wriggling toward her, now and then breathing a little spurt of smoke. The “serpent” disappeared, and she then saw others, all wriggling, twisting, turning, disappearing, and suddenly appearing in another spot a few yards away.

“Merciful heaven, what is it?” cried the Overland girl.

A little pine tree, not more than two yards in height, suddenly became the victim of one of these shining “serpents” and burst into crackling flames and was consumed in a few minutes.

“Fire!” cried the watcher. Elfreda turned,

startled, and fled towards the "burn" that her companions had made.

They saw her coming on fleet feet. Hamilton White waved to her to keep to the right, for the grass was still holding fire on the course she was following, but Elfreda took the gesture for a wave of welcome, and waved back. In the next second she saw the guide running towards her, followed by Grace.

Elfreda darted ahead, and was nearly at the edge of the burn when she came up with them. To her amazement, the guide picked her up, then threw her flat on the ground. He rolled her over and over in the blackened ashes of the grass, Grace assisting by vigorous pats, for Elfreda's skirt had caught fire.

The blaze was out in a moment, and now the girl began to feel the sting of burns. Assisted to her feet Elfreda was a sight, her face, neck and arms black, little patches of white showing here and there, accentuating the blackness of the rest.

"Quick, take her somewhere and look her over. Get oil from the store and put on her burns if she has any. Be lively. I—"

"The fiery serpents are there!" gasped Elfreda.

"What!" demanded the guide.

"They're there, darting all around just be-

yond the edge of the burn in the forest. I don't know—I think—”

“Take her away!” commanded White sternly.

The guide bounded across the burned space and plunged into the forest. He came back a few moments later, even more rapidly than he had gone out, never stopping until he reached the store porch.

Something in Hamilton White's attitude or in his expression silenced the villagers who had gone into spasms of laughter at Elfreda Briggs' plight.

“Men, the forest fire is yonder, less than an eighth of a mile away!” he shouted. “It may not be too late to save the village, but I think it is. Get your women and children down to the bank of the creek. Bring water and wet down everything. Work, you thick-heads!”

There were murmurs of objection. A puff of hot air was driven through the village, and a few moments later a blue haze settled over it. A great silence fell over the people. It was broken by a woman's scream.

“Fire!” yelled a man.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!”

The chorus was taken up by a hundred voices, and panic seized upon the inhabitants of Silver Creek.

CHAPTER III

A RAIN OF FIRE

“**W**ET down the roofs of all the houses. Keep your heads or you’re goners!” shouted Ham White.

The Overlanders had grabbed pails and filled them from the creek, running with them to points where water soon would be needed. Stacy, however, with his usual disinclination to work, took it upon himself to boss the villagers, which he did very well. He appeared to be not at all disturbed by the peril that menaced them.

The sky was now heavily overcast. To add to the gloom, daylight was fading with the prospect of a night of terror for the people of Silver Creek. The air grew hot and the pungent odor of smoke sent many into paroxysms of coughing.

Hamilton White, cool and collected, was giving terse orders here and there, and working with tireless energy. Hot puffs of wind drove through the village streets, and that, he knew, was the vanguard of what was to come.

Men were working under difficulties but to good purpose, for the guide was directing the work of covering roofs with wet blankets, which were wet down as fast as water could be brought. The smoke grew more dense, more suffocating with the moments, and, somewhere off to the south, a roar like that of an approaching storm was plainly heard. Ham White, hearing, understood.

“Look! Oh, look!” cried Nora Wingate.

Great tongues of flame were seen leaping into the air high above the tree-tops of the forest. Sparks and burning embers were now falling in the village streets. Overhead the air itself seemed to be on fire. Sheets of flame were curling and rolling through the forest like breakers on a reef. At one moment the sky would be lighted up brilliantly, and in the next deep, impenetrable darkness covered all.

The terror of the villagers increased, and the Overland girls, on their way to and fro for water, did what they could to calm the women, but without great success. To add to the terror and the peril, the village was now surrounded with fire on three sides. It seemed to be growing more threatening with the moments, and the clouds of soot became denser.

“Oh, how terrible!” cried Nora to Grace Harlowe.

“Yes, but one of the most tremendous spectacles I have ever seen,” answered Grace, whose face, like all others about her, was so black as to be almost unrecognizable.

In all the excitement, however, the two girls found time to observe and marvel. They saw streamers of fire appear to die out, and then charge forward toward the village at race-horse speed, threatening to envelop and devour it.

The villagers started to run as their panic increased.

“Stay where you are! You are safer here!” Ham White shouted in warning to all.

Houses were now catching fire, despite all efforts, and men worked in a frenzy, for, if the fire once got a good start in the village, they now knew that it would be destroyed. Some of the cooler heads among the women lent much assistance to the Overlanders, but most of them were too terrified to give any assistance at all.

“Some of these women surely will perish unless something is done at once,” said Miss Briggs. “Suggest something, Grace, for the love of heaven.”

“The creek! Help me herd them down on its bank,” answered Grace with ready resource. “Nora! You and Emma must assist. Don’t hesitate. Jump to it! There are men

enough to carry water. Lives are of more account than houses.”

The girls sprang to their task with energy. It was not an easy task to which they had assigned themselves, and the first of the women sent to the stream had to be forced there. There were choking protests, but the Overland girls gave no heed, as there was no time for argument, and seconds wasted might mean loss of lives.

“If your clothes catch fire, duck into the creek,” was the advice shouted over and over again to the village women by Grace and her companions. “Keep close to the shore or you may be swept off your feet and carried downstream.”

The latter part of the Overlanders’ advice was not heeded in every instance, and now and then one of the girls found it necessary to haul ashore some woman who was in danger of being carried away by the current.

As the heat in the village increased in intensity, shivering women and children were standing in the creek’s cold waters, protecting themselves from the burning air by covering their heads with wetted articles of clothing.

Another peril found them there. Logs, broken, charred tree-limbs, were rolling and tumbling down with the stream. Something

hit Elfreda, who was dragging a woman to safety, and pushed the girl under. Struggle as she would, Miss Briggs was unable for some time to extricate herself, though she did manage to keep her head above water. Her skirts had caught on the branches of what proved to be the bushy top of a tree, and she was swept away on the current.

After what seemed hours Elfreda succeeded in freeing herself, and permitted herself to float while she rested, breathing hard from her exertions.

The village of Silver Creek had disappeared in the distance. A roaring sound came to Elfreda's ears, which she soon discovered was caused by the rushing current of a turbulent river.

"Mercy! What am I coming to?" cried the girl in her extremity. Elfreda was frightened, but by no means panic-stricken. "Oh, this surely is the end!" gasped the girl as she found herself suddenly whirled into wild waters.

It was Roaring River into which Miss Briggs had been swept from the creek, and now her last hope seemed gone, for the stream was wide and full of floating logs and brush, and here and there dark objects brushed past her. The girl drifted on and on, chilled and exhausted, but still possessing a strength of will that kept her

from letting go, as many another would have done in her circumstances.

Of how long she had been in the water Elfreda had not the slightest idea, but it seemed to have been hours, when suddenly she was halted by the roots of a tree on the bank of the river, from which the dirt had been washed away.

Grasping at the roots, Miss Briggs clung there resting. After a little she dragged herself over the roots and finally reached soft yielding earth.

“Thank God!” breathed Elfreda fervently, and stretching out she sank into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

When Miss Briggs awakened from that sleep the sun was shining, but there was a yellow haze in the air, and the odor of smoke was wafted to her on the morning breeze. Birds were singing in the trees, and the earth seemed at peace.

“J. Elfreda, you have done it this time!” she rebuked herself. “Why did you ever go into that terrible water? Oh, what has become of the others? This will never do. I must do something!” she cried, rousing herself and standing up to look about her.

What to do, was the perplexing question. It was then that Elfreda discovered a trail.

Trees along the trail had been blazed, but the blazes were not new. The path had been used frequently, she observed, and led into the forest. For that the Overland girl was thankful.

After brief reflection, Miss Briggs decided to follow the trail that Fate had offered to her. It must lead somewhere, she reasoned. Had Elfreda been more familiar with life in the forest she would have known that this was either a trapper's or a fisherman's trail, but to her all forest blazes looked alike, so she plodded on slowly, keeping a sharp lookout for slashes on sides of the trees, and for signs of human habitation.

When an hour had passed, and the trail still led on, the girl began to lose heart. She sank down to rest and think, but as she peered underneath the low-hanging branches of underbrush and saplings, Elfreda made a discovery that set her pulses beating. There, less than fifty yards ahead of her, she saw a shack, and about it was a hedge of evergreens that undoubtedly had been placed there by human hands.

"Saved!" cried Elfreda, springing to her feet, forgetful of the aches and pains of a few moments before.

The Overland girl caught her breath sud-

denly, and a rush of color leaped to her cheeks, for Elfreda Briggs had made another discovery, and with it came the realization that a most amazing thing had occurred.

Uttering a shrill little cry, Elfreda started forward at a run.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST CABIN

“THE village is saved!”

Hamilton White, blackened, red-eyed, his clothing scorched, made that announcement as, at the break of day, he had opportunity to look about him.

“Yes, and not a life lost,” agreed Grace Harlowe, herself worn out and disheveled. “It is a miracle. Mr. White, they should get down on their knees to thank you for what you have done for Silver Creek. Without your resourcefulness— Well, there would be nothing left of the village or people.”

“Thank you!” Ham White bowed and grinned through the soot on his face. “The credit is due wholly to the assistance of the Overlanders. In other words, the shoe is on the other foot.”

“Well, what next?” demanded Hippy Wingate coming up, Emma Dean following, and taking her place beside the guide.

“Something to eat if we can find it, then to get out of here and to dodge what is left of the

fire," replied the guide. "Suppose we go down to the creek and wash our faces."

"Get out of here!" jeered Hippy. "With what? I haven't seen anything that looked like a horse since yesterday. I think our animals must have gone downstream, and that we are all fixed for a long hike to some place where fresh mounts can be had."

"Oh, Hamilton! Is it really true that the ponies have run away?" begged Emma, linking arms with the guide.

"Too true, little bird," chuckled Hippy.

"Thank you, Mr. Wingate. Being a bird is better than being a donkey," answered Emma.

"And hop from bough to bough, and chatter and then chatter some more," finished Hippy.

"While a donkey can only bray, and then bray some more," was Emma's parting shot, which brought a shout of laughter from the begrimed Overlanders.

Hippy made a gesture of helpless resignation, and turned to the guide to ask what they had better do.

"We will find the stock somewhere to the northeast, provided they have been neither burned nor drowned. Stock have an instinct that tells them to seek high ground," said the guide. "By the way, is Miss Briggs in one of the houses resting?"

“Elfreda!” cried Nora.

The girls looked at each other with the same question in their eyes. None had seen her since the evening before, and in the excitement and confusion she had not been missed.

“Girls, girls! Run!” cried Grace. “Go to every house in the village. She must be here! She must be here! Hippy! Mr. White! Please help us.”

There was instant compliance, and half an hour later the Overlanders met in front of the post office. Grace was the only one of the party that had any information to convey. Grace had found the woman whom Miss Briggs had tried to rescue, and ascertained that the last that woman had seen of her was when Elfreda had given her a vigorous push towards the shore.

For the first time since the Overlanders had known him, Ham White lost his composure. He steadied himself in a moment. Leaping to the steps of the store he shouted to the villagers that were still thronging the streets.

“Men!” he said. “These splendid young women have helped to save your town and your women and children. One of the young women, Miss Briggs, is missing. She *must* be found, and I want you men to form a searching party. Get your breakfasts, but never mind anything

else. If you are men, which I believe you to be, you won't have to be urged. I'll tell you what to do. Will you go?"

"Yes!" The answer was a shout. And Hamilton White smiled.

The guide directed the girls to steady themselves, and eat. As for himself, he wanted nothing to eat except what he could carry with him and munch on his way. White sent one searching party down each side of the creek, heading the party on the left side himself, with Lieutenant Hippy Wingate leading the party on the right.

"Do not worry if we aren't back as quickly as you might hope for, as we shall be looking for stock—for our horses—at the same time," he urged.

"Oh, Hamilton, do be careful of yourself," begged Emma as the men were starting away. "I shall demonstrate for you all the time you are away."

Grace linked an arm in Emma's.

"My dear, how long have you known Mr. White?" she asked gently.

"It seems as though I have always known him," answered Emma dreamily.

"As a matter of fact, you have known him less than a week. It is true we took him on the recommendation of the banker at Cresco, where

we made our start for the Cascade Range of Washington State, and we know him to be a man of intelligence, a brave, resourceful fellow, but there is still something about him that I do not understand. I don't believe he is what he represents himself to be, but, if we should ever go out again, he is the man I should like to have lead us. Just the same, that is no reason why you should be so forward. Emma, well-bred girls are not supposed to wear their hearts on their sleeves. Be a good fellow, which you are, but be dignified," admonished Grace smilingly.

"I am and I do," answered Miss Dean haughtily.

"Now let us forget our little lecture, and do what we can to assist the women of the village to get set, so to speak," suggested Grace. "We must not worry about Elfreda. I believe we shall find her and that she is as safe at this moment as we are."

"I'll demonstrate over her. I'll keep saying to myself, 'Elfreda is well and happy. No harm can come to her because only error can mean harm,' " promised Emma, bubbling and laughing.

"Come," said Grace. "Demonstrate after we have given some material aid to these distressed people."

It was about this time that Elfreda reached the shack in the forest and made the discovery that so startled her. Elfreda's amazement was caused by the sight of a human being, sitting on a stump near the shack. The human being was short and fat. He was eating from a can of baked beans, his big eyes regarding Miss Briggs soulfully, his cheeks puffed out with the beans.

"Stacy!" cried Elfreda. "Oh, Stacy Brown! Am I dreaming?"

"Mebby," mumbled the fat boy, digging more beans from the can.

Elfreda ran to him, and in her joy at seeing her Overland companion, she threw her arms about Stacy. In doing so she knocked the can of beans from his hands, and the rest of the contents was spilled on the ground.

"Now see what you've done," wailed the fat boy. "And the beanery fifty miles away."

"Never mind the beans. What is this place?"

"Lost cabin," answered Stacy promptly.

"How do you know?"

"I don't. I just guessed it. Hungry?"

"Famished," answered J. Elfreda.

"Some more canned stuff under the floor of the shack," he informed her, waving a hand towards the cabin, and picking up the spilled

beans one by one, placing each individual bean carefully in his mouth.

“First tell me how you got here?” demanded Miss Briggs.

“Came down on a Roaring River Liner—other words, a log. Where’s the party?”

“Trying to put out the fire at Silver Creek. Shall we try to find our way back?”

“What! With all that food cached in the shack?” demanded Stacy almost indignantly. “So long as the food holds out and no fire comes along, I stay right here. I know a good thing when I find it. After I get enough to keep my strength up I am going down to the river and catch some fish. Then we will have a real spread.”

“Hopeless!” exclaimed Elfreda. “I am glad to see you, though. I think you are right about remaining here for the day. When the fire is under control our folks will search for us, and Mr. White will pick up our trail.”

“Yes. I left ‘footprints’ in the river when the log rolled me off. Did you ever observe how wonderfully prominent ‘footprints’ in the water are, Elfreda?”

Elfreda gave her head a toss and walked to the cabin. It was a typical forest shack. There was a plain deal table, two chairs, a bed on the floor and blankets hung over a line. The

dishes were limited, but sufficient for one or two persons. She investigated an opening in the floor, from which Stacy had lifted the trap door, and found there a good supply of canned goods, some rope, axes, picks and shovels.

"A forest ranger's shack," she murmured. "Yes, I think that must be it." Elfreda helped herself to a can of beans, surveyed it ruefully and carried it outside.

"Have you the can-opener, Stacy?" she asked.

Stacy shook his head.

"How did you open your cans then?" Several empty cans lay about the stump on which he was sitting.

"With my teeth. Bit 'em open!" said the fat boy thickly.

"Stacy Brown, you are impossible! I think I know a better way." Elfreda got an axe from the shack and attacked the can of beans. She made a bad job of it, and most of the beans that were not mashed flat were scattered about on the ground. These, the fat boy gathered up carefully and placed in his own can.

"Get another can. I'm busy, but I will open it for you. Girls are so helpless."

"I am beginning to agree with you," answered Miss Briggs, returning to the cabin for

another can. When she came back Stacy removed the top of the can with his knife, and handed the food to her.

“For this, you buy me a new knife when we reach a store somewhere. Knives cost money, and I can’t afford to waste mine on girls.”

“You shall have a new knife, and thank you very much for your courtesy,” returned Elfreda.

Stacy gave her a sidelong glance.

“You look all fagged out. After you finish that can, better go in and lie down. Besides, it won’t do to overload your stomach so soon after a bath.”

“Oh, you funny boy!” Elfreda laughed until two tear drops were sparkling on her brown cheeks. “If you will catch some fish I promise to cook them for you, and we will have a real spread. Yes, I will take a nap, for I am completely fagged. Did you discover any coffee in the shack?”

“Uh-huh. I didn’t have time to make coffee. I’m too busy to do so now.”

Miss Briggs went to the shack, spread out the blankets for inspection, and found them clean; so she laid them on the bed and stretched out for a rest. Until then she had not realized how weary she was, and, in a few moments, fell into a deep sleep.

After a time Stacy took a nap by the stump, from which he did not awaken until late in the afternoon. He did not know what time it was, his watch having stopped on his wet ride from the village of Silver Creek. The fat boy decided to go fishing. There was a bamboo pole, hook and line in the shack, and this he got, after taking a squint at the sleeping Elfreda.

“Girls are such sleepy-heads,” muttered the boy, as he shouldered the pole and went out, making all the noise he could, all of which failed to awaken Miss Briggs. On the way to the stream he looked for a rotting stump, one of which he eventually found, and with his hunting knife managed to dig out some nice white grubs for bait.

“Humph! They do look almost good enough to eat,” he muttered, surveying some of the grubs in the palm of his hand. “I don’t blame the fish for liking them.”

Shortly after that the fat boy sat down on the bank with his line in the water, thoroughly at peace with the world, and content to remain where he was so long as the food held out.

Stacy had not been fishing long when he heard a horse approaching, but did not turn his head, his eyes remaining fixed on the fish line that caused a little ripple in the stream as it split the current.

"Hello, boy!" called a voice behind him.

"Same to you," returned Stacy.

"Fishing?"

"No. Just teaching this grub how to swim."

"Say, you! You're too fresh. I've a good mind to throw you into the river," growled the newcomer.

"Better not. I'll get wet."

"Where do you come from?" demanded the man, his voice sharp and incisive.

"Up Silver Creek way. I came down here on the river packet to get away from the forest fire."

"I mean, where do you live?"

"Right here at the present moment. I don't look as if I were dead, do I?"

"You may be soon if you ain't more civil. What happened to the village?"

"Some people got singed, others got wet. I got a little of both before I shipped."

The man got down from his horse and stepped around where he could see the fat boy's face. Stacy gave him a slow, sidelong glance, then turned his attention to his line. He had a bite, and a few seconds later he landed a fish.

"Huh!" grunted the stranger. "Anybody with you?"

"A few grubs in my pocket and myself, that's all. Who are you?"

“None of your business!”

Stacy regarded the stranger blinkingly. The fellow was not a pleasant-looking man, and a scar across one cheek gave him a still more evil look. The horse he rode, Stacy observed, was a fine animal and looked as though it could develop a lot of speed.

“Where’d you get the nag?” questioned the boy.

“Bought him. Didn’t think I stole him, did you?” demanded the man indignantly.

Stacy shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply. He resumed his fishing.

“Let me give you some advice, young fellow. This is no place for children. You git out of here, and stay out. I’ll be back later, and if you’re here then I’ll help you out on the run.”

“Thanks,” drawled the fat boy without looking up.

The stranger rode away, and Stacy resumed his fishing. He caught a fine mess of trout; then the grubs gave out. Being too tired to return to the shack just then the Overlander decided to take a nap, which he proceeded to do. Night came on, and Stacy Brown was still asleep. So was Elfreda Briggs, in the shack. Miss Briggs had not moved since she lay down hours before.

It was late when she finally suddenly roused

herself and sat up. The cabin was enshrouded in darkness. Peering out, she saw that it was night.

“Stacy!” she called. There was no response. Stacy Brown was sleeping peacefully on the bank of Roaring River.

Elfreda wondered what had awakened her so suddenly. Then all at once she understood. She heard a horse approaching. The animal stopped just beyond the cabin. Miss Briggs did not go to the door, but got to her feet and listened. She thought she heard someone groan; then all was silence for a moment.

“Oh!” exclaimed the Overland girl under her breath as the door of the shack was slowly pushed open. “Who is it?” she cried, with all the steadiness that she could summon. Miss Briggs reached for her revolver, but it was not in its holster.

A man staggered in. She could see his figure faintly outlined in the doorway.

“Help! I’m shot—I’m dying!” groaned the man, and collapsed at the feet of Elfreda Briggs.

CHAPTER V

A FRUITLESS QUEST

“GRACE! Oh, Grace!”

After several hours of hard work assisting the women of the village to untangle the confusion of their homes, the contents of most of which were in the streets, Nora came running in search of Grace Harlowe.

“What is wrong, Nora?” begged Grace a little fearfully.

“Have you seen Stacy?”

“No. Come to think of it, I have not. Why, I haven’t seen him since last night, either.”

“Neither has anyone else, so far as I have been able to learn.”

“Are you positive that he did not go out with the men this morning?” asked Grace.

“They say he did not.”

“Chunky”—as his companions sometimes called him—“is probably asleep somewhere about,” suggested Emma Dean. “You know what a wonderful sleeper he is.”

“I doubt it,” answered Grace reflectively. “Was he in the creek?”

Nora said she did not know.

“That makes two of our party that are missing. What are we going to do?” begged Nora, tears of anxiety springing to her eyes.

“We will search for him in the vicinity of the village. That is all we can do. If we do not find him we simply shall have to wait until the men return to-night,” decided Grace.

“If Hamilton were only here he would know what is best,” complained Emma.

Grace gave her a look of rebuke.

—“Mr. White probably will find the boy. He will leave nothing undone, of that we girls are certain, and we shall have to make the best of a bad situation, which may not be nearly so bad as it seems,” comforted Grace. “Come, let us take different directions and search the village and its immediate vicinity.”

“I have another one to demonstrate over now. I don’t want to demonstrate over Chunky, but I suppose it wouldn’t be honest not to,” complained Emma. “This is terrible.”

The girls separated and made a careful search about the village and out among the trees, as far from the village as they dared to go. There were still many little smouldering fires, but there was so little for them to feed upon that they could not spread.

Not a trace of the missing boy did the girls find, though there was plenty of tragic evidence of the deadly work of the forest fire everywhere they went. The girls returned, giving up the task.

"We must wait, and go on with our work. It will help to keep our minds from our worries. My husband would be a great comfort if he were here, for Tom is ever ready and resourceful," murmured Grace.

"He is no better than Hamilton," protested Emma indignantly. "What Hamilton doesn't know about everything up here isn't worth knowing."

The girls laughed at Emma, who turned away, face flushed and eyes moist. They busied themselves all the rest of the day, but when night came on, the searchers had not returned. Shortly after nine o'clock, however, a shout told the anxious Overlanders that someone was approaching. It proved to be Hippy Wingate and his party. Hippy reported that they had not found a trace of Elfreda Briggs. He was shocked when he learned that Stacy also was missing.

It was an hour later when Hamilton White and his party of searchers came in. They were leading a bunch of horses.

"We got them all but one, folks," he cried

as the villagers and the Overlanders crowded about him and his party.

“But Miss Briggs!” wailed Nora Wingate. “Don’t tell me that—”

“She was not found on the left-hand side of the river. We followed Roaring River down to a point about fifteen miles below here. As you see, we got all the mounts but one, and that one evidently was swept away, else he would have been with his mates.”

White was speaking more rapidly than was his wont, and Grace was regarding him keenly.

“Did you know that Stacy Brown is missing also?” she asked.

The guide regarded her for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “Don’t be disheartened, Mrs. Gray. To-morrow I shall take the other side of the river and stay out until I get a definite line on what has happened. It would have been useless to remain out longer to-night.”

After a little, when he had answered many questions, White beckoned Grace aside.

“You are a level-headed woman, Mrs. Gray, so I think it best to tell you what I have discovered. I—”

“I knew you were keeping something back. Tell me. The truth is better than the suspense.”

“No, I don’t agree with you. I found Miss Briggs’ hat and her handkerchief on my side of the river. The men with me do not know this. The current on my side of the stream set into a bend at one point, then switched over to the right-hand side. That is why I am going down the right-hand side to-morrow. To me the finding of the hat is proof that our missing woman was really swept downstream, but my confidence in Miss Briggs’ cool-headedness is so strong that I believe she found a way to get out of the river.”

“I hope so,” replied Grace quietly. “By the same token, I think we shall find Stacy. If he succeeds in finding something to eat, he will remain where the food is until it is exhausted,” she added with a little smile.

“Just so,” agreed the guide. “I am more disturbed about possible peril to Miss Briggs after she escaped from the river.”

“Meaning what?” demanded Grace.

“That there is danger to the north of us—a peril worse than forest fires or wild beasts.”

“Yes, yes!” urged Grace.

“I mean the Murrays.”

Grace said she never had heard of them.

“They are notorious bandits, cutthroats, robbers, everything that is vicious. Did Miss Briggs wear any jewels?”

“She did—a diamond ring that is quite valuable, and a jewelled watch that was presented to her by the French government after she finished her work there with our college unit in the war.”

“They would kill for less than that!” was the disturbing announcement of Hamilton White, as he turned abruptly away.

Ham White did not wait until morning to resume his search. After taking a light supper, and packing some “grub” in his kit bag, he quietly forded the creek with one of the Overland ponies, then disappeared in the darkness, headed downstream. Only Lieutenant Hippy Wingate knew that he had gone. Ham White was headed towards an adventure that proved to be a thrilling one, both for himself and others.

CHAPTER VI

FACING A NEW PERIL

“**S**HO—SHOT!” gasped Elfreda Briggs, as the stranger lay huddled on the floor where he had fallen. He was breathing heavily, and perhaps it was this that brought Miss Briggs to herself. After long service with wounded men in France, she knew what a bullet wound was, and her first instinct upon recovering from her fright was to give first aid.

Elfreda had found candles and matches in the cabin, and these she quickly procured, lighting two candles the better to see her patient. She peered down at her unexpected guest, a long, lean figure, his lined, unshaven face ashen from pain and weakness. Elfreda instantly recognized the symptoms.

“Oh, you poor, poor man!” she cried in a voice full of sympathy, and placed a folded blanket under his head. Then the Overland girl ran out to a spring just back of the cabin, returning with a basin of cold mountain water. First giving the wounded man a drink, she tore open the faded, worn shirt and bathed his

wound, which she knew at once was a serious one.

This served to rouse the patient a little, and he regarded her with searching eyes—eyes that were full of pain.

“Tha—ank you. You’re a good girl. What be you doing here?”

“I belong to a party, but was carried down the river from Silver Creek village when the forest fire reached there. Never mind that—tell me about yourself.”

“The gang got me—Hawk Murray’s gang. Name’s Sam Petersen, and I’m a prospector—was a prospector, but I’m done, finished now.”

“Why did they shoot you?”

“For gold, Miss, gold! But I hung on to my horse and got away. They’ll be here.”

Elfreda begged him not to worry, seeing that the thought of the Murray gang excited him.

“Promise me, for your own sake, that you will not let them find me or know that I have been here. If they find out they’ll do the same by you that they have done by Sam Petersen.”

Miss Briggs caressed the gray head, and moistened his lips with the cold mountain water. Then, as tenderly as possible, she dragged the wounded man to the bunk at one corner of the room, where he might be more comfortable.

“It’s mighty good to have you help me, but tain’t no use. I’ve staked my last claim and—listen!” Petersen roused himself, and a new light flashed into his eyes. “I must tell you, and I must do it quick. Reach in my pocket and take out the diary there. Hide it! Left hand po—pocket. That’s it.”

Elfreda hesitatingly drew forth a well-worn book, the corners of which were broken down and the leaves swollen from frequent thumbing.

“There’s something else there, too. Take that, too; it’s your’n.”

The Overland girl drew forth a small canvas bag, soiled and worn, and heavy. It was tied at the neck with a buckskin thong, and at his nod she opened the bag. She saw a handful of nuggets, some worn and shiny, water-worn as they proved to be, while at the bottom of the bag was some dust.

“Gold!” murmured Elfreda Briggs. “Is this why they shot you, Mr. Petersen?”

“Yes, and for what’s in that diary. Mebby you’ve heard of Lost Mine, a dried-up water course that the Indians say many years ago was paved with gold.”

Elfreda shook her head.

“Crazy prospectors like Sam Petersen have been hunting for that mine for more’n twenty-five years. Sam Petersen found it!” The

man's voice had dropped to a thrilling whisper. A dead silence followed, broken by the hoot of an owl near the cabin.

Elfreda shivered a little.

"It's there in the book—all but how to get there. Hawk Murray and his gang found out that I'd got this bag of dust and nuggets. They knew I'd been prospecting for just what they'd been trying for a long time to find, and they believed I'd found it. Hawk and his bunch trailed me, and we had a shooting match. I downed one of the gang, but Hawk got me. Lady, I ain't a bad man—I'm an honest man, but up here a man's what he is, and if he ain't able to shuffle for himself he's all set to be shuffled off one day."

"You are talking too much—exerting too much effort. Be quiet and rest," commanded Elfreda.

"I got to talk. I got to talk fast. I ain't got much more time. Write down in the book what I got to say. Ready?"

Miss Briggs nodded. "Lost River, north branch, Grandma and the Children, three peaks dead east—and there's the bed of Lost River. In it is gold, shining gold, the promised land and—it's yours. I ain't got no family."

"I don't quite understand. Can you make it a little clearer?"

“All yours and—”

“Please don’t talk any more. I want you to rest. You are getting excited. What is gold compared to a man’s life, Mr. Petersen?”

There was no reply.

Elfreda Briggs glanced at the face, then, leaning over, peered closer.

“Get rid of the horse—shoot him. They’ll be here soon after daylight and then—”

That was all. The tired old voice trailed off into nothingness. Sam Petersen had staked his last claim.

Tears trickled down Elfreda’s cheeks. A thin gray bar of daylight was now creeping across the cabin floor, and with it came the memory of the old prospector’s warning: “The Murray gang will be here soon after daylight”—and then—“Get rid of the horse!”

Realizing that perhaps her own life might hang on following Petersen’s advice, Miss Briggs sprang up and ran out. Standing a few yards from the cabin, there was a fine bay mare browsing on the tender leaves of the hedge. The animal regarded her solemnly, and, she thought, with a friendly approving look.

“You poor horse! Shoot *you*? I couldn’t do it, but I am going to try to hide you,” declared the Overland girl.

Gripping the bridle she led the animal off to the right of the cabin until she reached a stream. Into this she led the animal for some distance, and secreted him in a narrow pass that was well hidden.

“I think I will take the saddle and hide that,” reflected Elfreda. Upon second thought she decided to carry it back and hide it near the cabin, for she recognized it as a fine Mexican saddle. The saddle she did secrete in a thick growth of bushes about fifty yards from the shack.

As she approached the cabin her footsteps became halting.

“What if they should come and find him here? Oh, this is terrible. Where, where can Stacy be? Why doesn’t he come back?”

It was not a pleasant task that confronted Elfreda Briggs, but she went to it with lips set, face pale, and heart beating nervously. She covered the thin old frame of Sam Petersen, and over it laid the blankets.

“Oh, this is terrible,” moaned the girl, then grew suddenly rigid. The sound of approaching horses reached her alert ears as she stood in the middle of the floor, every faculty on the alert.

They galloped up to the shack and halted.

“Hello the cabin!” called a rough voice.

Miss Briggs pinched her cheeks to bring back the color that she knew had left them, then summoning all her courage she stepped to the door. That courage almost failed her when she saw before her six of the roughest looking men she ever had seen. They were mounted on lean, tough horses; there was a rifle in every saddle boot, and they wore side arms as well.

“The Murrays!” gasped the girl. “Sam Petersen knew whereof he spoke.”

CHAPTER VII

THE DISCOVERY

“**H**AWK MURRAY!” exclaimed Elfreda Briggs, as one of the horsemen rode around the hedge and up to the door of the cabin. Elfreda recognized the man by his long hooked nose that really resembled the beak of a hawk. It was not a pleasant face to look upon.

“Mornin’, Miss,” he greeted, with an attempt at politeness.

“Good morning, sir,” replied Miss Briggs firmly, essaying a smile as she said it, though she did not feel like smiling, for the eyes of the rider seemed to be searching her very soul.

“Do ye live here?” was the next question.

“For the present, yes.”

“Ye don’t reckon ye’ve seen a stranger on a bay mare passin’ here this mornin’, do ye?” he questioned, leaning over and peering into the face of the Overland girl.

“No, sir. No one has passed here, so far as I know, since daylight. I don’t know who passed before that. Why do you ask?”

“We’re a posse on the track of a hoss thief. The bay mare he rode was stole, and some gold he had was stole, too.”

“Indeed!” observed Elfreda.

“We trailed the thief this way, but back a piece we kind of lost the trail,” volunteered the Hawk, grinning apologetically. “Be ye alone?”

“Oh, no. I am with a party. They are not here now, but I look for them to arrive shortly,” she answered, trying hard not to appear disturbed.

“Well, so long. We’ll be on our way.” The man swung off his hat and, wheeling his horse about, jogged along. Her heart sank as she saw that the riders were taking a direction, which, if followed on, would lead perilously close to the spot at which she had secreted Sam Petersen’s horse. She regarded each man keenly as they passed her, and theirs she saw on close inspection were hard, callous, reckless faces. There was coldness, there was daring, in them.

The last man in the line, younger than his companions, while his face was also cold, appeared to be of a character different from the others. There was a poise of the head, a grace in riding, and in the manner with which he bowed as he swung his hat low, that singled him

out as a man somewhat above his fellows, in intelligence at least.

The riders were out of sight in a moment, and, with their passing, Elfreda Briggs' knees grew suddenly weak. She staggered into the cabin and sat down heavily.

"Had they come in I don't know what I should have done," murmured the girl, placing a hand on the diary that she had hidden in her blouse. The bag of nuggets and "dust" lay in plain sight near the bunk on which Sam Petersen lay. Elfreda hurriedly sprang up and secreted the bag under the blankets. Then a sudden thought came to her. She recalled that the old prospector wore a holster, and that she had noticed the size of the revolver butt that protruded from it. Instant determination to possess herself of the weapon seized her.

"They will return! I feel it!" she cried.

It took but a moment to get the weapon and the cartridge belt, to both of which the girl gave critical inspection, for Elfreda had handled revolvers, both in France in wartime, and on their annual summer outings in the saddle. The weapon was loaded, and several rounds of cartridges still remained in the belt.

"There!" she exclaimed, after strapping the holster on. "I at least have the means of defending myself. Hark!"

Hoof-beats were plainly audible, but they seemed to be those of only one horse. A glance through the doorway, without revealing herself, verified this.

“It’s the good-looking one,” breathed Elfreda, retiring into the shadows and giving her holster a shift. “I must go out. It never will do to let that man come into the cabin,” she decided as she stepped to the door with an expression of surprised inquiry in her eyes.

“Ye didn’t think I’d be back so soon, did ye?” he grinned.

“I don’t think I looked for you to return,” Elfreda replied. “What is it you wish?”

“I reckoned as I’d like a drink of water.”

“Wait. I will fetch a dipper. The spring is just beyond the stump over yonder.” Elfreda was out with a dipper in her hand in a moment, and held it up to him, but the rider did not take it. He swung from the saddle and stood leaning against his mount, regarding her with something like a twinkle in his eyes. Elfreda saw that twinkle and was reassured.

“I see ye’ve got your hardware on,” he said, pointing to the revolver. “Purty sizable gun for a lady, eh? Ye didn’t have it on when I was here before.”

“Perhaps I was expecting more company after you went off. Why do you ask?”

The rider shrugged his shoulders.

“Reckon I’ll take that dipper now,” he said, extending a hand for it. Elfreda gave it to him, and keen as his eyes were, it is doubtful if he discovered the fear that Elfreda felt. After stepping back she got a broom and began sweeping up the cabin floor, which she was still doing when the man returned from the spring. Hearing him coming, she stepped outside.

“Thankee,” he said, returning the dipper.

“What would ye say, lady, if I told ye I wanted to search the shack?” he asked.

“I should say *no!*” was the emphatic reply.

“And what if I decided to do it anyhow?” grinned the mountain rider.

“I’d shoot you!” she answered coldly.

“Sufferin’ cats! I believe ye would. Never can tell what these quiet kind might do. Can I have a look at the little toy?” he teased.

“You may look at the muzzle, if you wish.”

The fellow laughed and slapped his thigh.

“Ye’re a cool one, I’ll tell them all.”

“Thank you.” Elfreda was covertly watching every movement of her caller, every expression of face and eyes, and she could not but feel that he was unusually confident about something. Rack her brain as she might, she could not think what that something might be,

unless Hawk's party had discovered the bay mare, which she did not believe was a fact, for the party had swerved off to the right after leaving the vicinity of the forest cabin.

"If I reckerlect, lady, ye told the boss that ye hadn't seen any strangers hereabouts—a fellow on a bay mare, an old party and a tough one."

"I told you no one had passed here, and to the latter part of your question I am free to say that your party included the only 'tough ones' I have seen since coming into the forest."

"So! I reckon I see the p'int. Lady, what about that saddle over there in the brush?"

Elfreda could feel her face going pale.

"The—the saddle!" she gasped, but instantly recovered herself. "What saddle do you mean?"

"I mean Sam Petersen's saddle. I'd know that leather among all the rest in the Cascade range. He stole that, too. Now where's the bay mare? He sure didn't ride her away without the saddle."

"Find him, if you want to know. Don't ask me! As for the saddle that you say is over yonder in the brush, draw whatever conclusions you wish. Is that all? If so, I have work to do and will go to it," announced J. Elfreda with great dignity.

"I reckon that's 'bout all, 'cept that I'd like to look over that shack."

"Very well, you may step up to the door and look in, but no farther if you value your life," replied Elfreda, turning her back on him and stepping through the doorway.

The visitor was not slow to accept the invitation. He reached the threshold, and was about to stride into the cabin when he suddenly found himself facing the old prospector's revolver, held in the steady hand of Elfreda Briggs.

"You may take a look at the revolver now if you like," she offered. "Stay where you are!"

A glint came into the man's eyes, a glint of danger, but it faded and he laughed.

"Very neat, Miss. I think I'll take a look at that bunk over there, and that there hole in the floor with the trap door in it."

"Out! Instantly!" Elfreda's voice rang out with a new note in it.

The unwelcome guest's hand sagged slowly towards his own holster.

"Hands up! Quick!"

The man obeyed, his eyes never leaving hers, nor did Elfreda's eyes leave those of her caller. While he undoubtedly, with his long experience in quick work, could have dodged and

drawn and fired ere Miss Briggs was able to prevent it, he did not do so. Perhaps he feared that she might hit his horse instead of himself, for that animal was directly in range with her weapon.

“Mount! Leave this place instantly! If you attempt to interfere with me you will do so at your peril!” she warned.

“Farewell, lady,” he answered mockingly. “I shall see ye just the same, and ye will answer my questions next time.” The fellow swung into his saddle, Miss Briggs still keeping her weapon trained on him as she followed him out.

Then she saw the man suddenly stiffen in his saddle, and what followed came at such speed that she was dazed. The fellow’s revolver leaped, it seemed to her, from its holster and met his hand half way. There was a sudden report, and a faint puff of grayish smoke from the muzzle.

A fraction of a second, after the report of his weapon, brought a shot from somewhere to the left of the Overland girl. The bandit’s horse jumped, and to Elfreda it was plain that the animal had been hit. It reared, and its rider toppled over and plunged backwards to the ground.

“He’s killed!” cried Miss Briggs, dropping



The Bandit Was Using Elfreda as a Shield.

her own weapon and running to the prostrate bandit who lay where he had fallen, his face turned to one side, and half hidden by his sombrero. She gave no thought to the peril that she might be inviting by aiding the ruffian. Her one thought was to give aid.

The girl was bending over him, when, in a flash, the fellow was on his feet, and two sinewy hands had grabbed her arms and whirled her about in the direction of the shot that had been fired at him. Elfreda Briggs had walked into a trap!

That was not all. A report at her ear was followed by another and another. The bandit was shooting over her shoulder, using the Overland girl as a shield.

There were no answering shots, nor could Elfreda see what the bandit had been shooting at, but she stood frozen, while he, alert and cool, kept his gaze fixed on a clump of bushes a few dozen yards ahead of them.

Elfreda had not uttered a sound. She was trembling, but rather than have the man using her as a shield know this she summoned all her will power and gained control of herself.

The bandit fired again. The shooting, so close to her ear, fairly deafened her. Elfreda had another cause for worry, for she did not know at what instant the bandit's enemy might

conclude to fire again. To a person in her position, that was not a comforting thought. No answering shot came, and the girl drew a long breath of relief.

Not a word had passed between them up to this point, but now she spoke.

“You coward!” breathed Elfreda.

“Had to do it,” was the brief reply.

“You will pay dearly for this,” she threatened.

“Shut up! I’ll give ye a clout over the head if ye don’t, and I’d hate to do that to a purty gal like—” *Bang!*

The bandit fired. Then a strange thing happened, and Elfreda was hurled forward on her face with unexpected violence.

CHAPTER VIII

STACY TAKES A HAND

“**W**OW! I’ll show you that you can’t steal my beans and my fish!” yelled an angry voice behind Miss Briggs.

The outlaw was pulling himself together and unsteadily getting to his feet just as Elfreda sprang to hers. Then there sounded a sudden whack, a grunt, and the bandit again measured his length on the ground, after receiving another blow on the head.

“Stacy! Stacy Brown!” cried Elfreda, for it was Stacy who had stolen up behind the bandit and clouted the outlaw on the head with a stick just after the fellow had fired his last shot.

Ere the man had fully recovered from this last whack, Chunky had sprung forward and snatched up the bandit’s weapon.

“Now you get out of this before I get mad. I’m only out of patience now, but when I’m mad I’m a dangerous man. Get!”

With his own revolver trained on him, the bandit evidently considered prudence the wise

course. He had not yet fully recovered from Stacy's last wallop, and staggered as he ran to his horse. As he swung into his saddle, a shot from somewhere brought a grunt from the fellow, and the Overlander saw the bandit shudder.

"Don't shoot! He's hit," warned Elfreda.

"I didn't shoot this time. It was someone else," flung back the boy. "You move, and you move fast. And next time you steal a fellow's beans and fish, you pick out some fellow who'll stand for it!"

The outlaw rode away at a brisk gallop, swaying a little in his saddle, still considerably dazed from Stacy's two wallops, and in pain from the bullet that had hit him.

"Stacy! Oh, Stacy!" cried Elfreda, running to the boy and throwing both arms about him. "You wonderful boy! I never thought you had such courage."

"Courage? I'm a hero! I always was. All I needed was the opportunity to show that I am. I ought to have a medal."

"You shall have one. Do—do you think he will come back?" she asked with an apprehensive glance in the direction taken by the outlaw.

"Come back? Why, I should say he wouldn't. That fellow is scared stiff. You couldn't drag him back here."

“There are others, Stacy. You don’t know all. They were all here, and after they went away he came back and—”

“Others?” Stacy’s face went solemn. “If that’s the case, I reckon we’d better run while the running is good.”

“I can’t, not yet. I must talk with you. There is something to be done before we leave. But you were so brave, and all the time you were hiding behind the bushes, letting that desperate fellow shoot at you without your firing a shot fearing that you might hit me. It was wonderful! What did you mean when you accused the man of stealing your fish—had you seen him before?”

“Of course I had seen him. He tried to interfere with me while I was fishing for a mess of trout for you yesterday afternoon. I did get a mess of them, beauties, too,” declared Stacy boastfully. “I finally got tired; the bait gave out, so I ate part of a can of beans and lay down for a nap. Well, I didn’t wake up, I guess, until this morning. The fish were gone, and so were the rest of the beans. I tell you I was good and angry. When I got here you were having your misunderstanding with the ruffian.”

“And you really were in those bushes shooting at him?”

“I was in the bushes all right.”

“But who fired that last shot that hit him?” demanded Miss Briggs suddenly, regarding her companion narrowly.

“The—the sec— That’s so. I wonder who did. He was some shooter. But listen! I know. It must have been one of that fiend’s friends shooting at me. He didn’t hit the fellow he fired at. Isn’t that a good joke on the fellow in the bushes, and on the one that got hit?” cried the fat boy, his assurance returning. “Tell me what has happened here.” Stacy was stalking back and forth twirling the outlaw’s weapon on his finger.

“Come with me to the shack and I will tell you. Tragedy, not comedy, has come to this place. I would have given anything could you have been here to help me, for, Stacy, I needed help as I never in my life needed it before. Listen, for we must lose no time in doing what we have to do, and then get away from this unhappy spot.”

They were in the cabin by this time.

“A man came here last night, wounded and faint. I tried to help him, but he was beyond help. Stacy, the poor fellow died. Those ruffians had shot him. I do not think the man who shot him was the one who made a shield of me, but it was one of the same gang.”

“Di—died!” gasped Stacy.

“Yes, in a few minutes after he got here. I have his horse hidden some little distance from here.”

“Whe—whe—where is he?”

“There!” she announced gently, pointing to the bunk. “We can’t leave him there, Stacy. There is something to be done, and I just can’t bring myself to do it.”

Stacy, his eyes large and round, backed hurriedly from the shack.

“Come on out. I can’t talk in there any more,” he urged, and Elfreda joined him at once. “Let me think. I can’t do it, either. I can fight a bad man, or wild animals, but this—this I—I can’t. Why did they shoot him?”

“They said he was a horse thief, but I know better. He possessed information that they wanted. This fellow that you sent away found the man’s saddle, though I don’t know how he chanced to discover it. The horse he may have discovered also, but I hardly think so. If not, we can take the animal and try to find our way back to Silver Creek.”

“Yes. Let’s find the horse. We can send Ham White back to do what you said. Where is the horse?”

“We will go look for him, but we must

proceed with caution," said Elfreda. "Take your revolver and I will take mine. You fall in behind. I will lead because I know the way."

Stacy did not appear to relish the mission at all, but he relished still less being left alone at the cabin, so he followed along obediently. Elfreda proceeded with great caution, watching the ground and the surrounding forest.

"Keep perfectly quiet," she warned, as they neared the spot where the horse had been secreted. "Stay where you are," added Elfreda in a whisper, then crept forward.

"This is spooky," muttered the fat boy. "I don't like what I can't see."

"Stacy!" There was alarm in Elfreda's voice. "Come here!"

He did not move as rapidly as he might, but a few moments later was standing at her side, and Stacy blinked as his gaze followed the direction in which she pointed.

A handsome bay mare lay dead in the secluded spot. It was the horse that Sam Petersen had left in her charge.

"Shot! The brutes!" cried Elfreda. "They have shot her. Well, perhaps that is better. Mr. Petersen asked me to dispose of the animal or hide her. What a pity!"

"I call it a good riddance. Say, Elfreda, you don't suppose any of that gang are hanging

around here, do you?" questioned Stacy apprehensively.

"Gracious! I hope not. Come, let us get away from this place."

Stacy was quite ready to move, and took the lead, Elfreda following. They lost no time in getting back to the cabin, but, as they approached, Stacy again began to lag.

"Aren't we going down to the river and try to find our way back to our party?" he asked as his companion started to enter the cottage.

"Not yet. I have something to do in here first," she made reply. "Oh!" Elfreda sprang back.

"Wha—wha—what!"

"There's someone in there," she whispered.

"Oh, wow!" Stacy jumped and started off.

Elfreda looked her disgust, and, summoning her courage, stepped into the cabin.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

"I was waiting to see how steady your nerves are," answered a voice that brought a thrill to her. A man rose and stepped towards her.

"Mr. White! Stacy, come in, it's all right," she called, a happier note in her voice. "I am so glad to see you, for I need you." Elfreda shook hands with the guide. "How long have you been here?"

"I came in just a moment ago. My horse is

down near the river, where I picked up your trail and came up here. What has been going on here? I believe there was some shooting up this way. So it sounded to me."

"The Murrays have been here, and, had it not been for Stacy, I fear something serious might have happened to me. Stacy really saved me, even going so far as to let one of the outlaws shoot at him. Would you think, from what you have seen of him, that Stacy is brave enough to fight a duel with one of that gang?"

Ham White looked solemn and shook his head.

"Our party is very much worried about you, Miss Briggs—"

"Oh, are they all right?" cried the Overland girl, flushing at thought of her forgetfulness.

"Every one of them, but we must get back to them as soon as possible. Tell me the story."

Elfreda then related the whole story of her experiences, passing briefly over her trip down the creek and the river, and relating the story of the arrival of Sam Petersen and his death, omitting the incident of the diary, as well as the story of the lost mine and the bag of nuggets and dust.

"Died here? Where is—"

"There!" answered the girl in a low voice, pointing to the bunk. "You and Stacy will

please do what is necessary. I could do it if I had to, but so long as you are here it is better not."

"What did the ruffian who came back here look like?"

Miss Briggs described the man in detail.

"That was Two-gun Murray, one of the most notorious gun-fighters on the range. He has more brains than his brother, Hawk Murray, and some personal charm, but he is a cold-blooded ruffian. Is he the fellow you saw down by the river, that Miss Briggs has told me about?" questioned White, turning to Stacy.

"Yes. And he is the fellow who stole my fish and ate my beans," complained the boy.

"I wonder what that 'crowd was after Sam Petersen for?" reflected the guide, regarding the two Overlanders from beneath half-closed eyelids.

"He had something that they wanted—information or something of the sort," murmured Miss Briggs. Elfreda was not yet ready to confide in the guide. She wished for time to think over carefully what Petersen had told her, and to examine his diary critically.

"I don't quite get it, but I will," he replied. Ham White got up briskly.

"Come, Stacy. Let us do our duty."

"Just a moment," begged Elfreda. "I wish

to do something here first. Will you two please step outside?"

The guide gave her a quick look, and his face hardened ever so little. He bowed and walked from the cabin. The instant he was out of sight, Miss Briggs got the bag of gold and secreted it in her blouse.

"Mr. White, I am going out in the forest to think, while you are busy here," she added, stepping from the cabin. Elfreda's face was flushed. Hamilton White regarded her narrowly but merely nodded in reply to her announcement. That nod was cold, and Miss Briggs realized it. Her head was held a little higher as she walked away, though she knew that self-imagined guilt was at the back of her annoyance.

Ham White knew that there was some purpose in the Overland girl's remaining in the cabin for a few moments; perhaps he came nearer to knowing her purpose than Elfreda imagined.

The girl sat down under a tree and thought. The bag of gold in her blouse troubled her. Elfreda took it out and emptied the contents in her lap. Apparently a small fortune lay there, but, as she gathered up a handful of the contents of the bag, Elfreda Briggs made a terrible discovery.

CHAPTER IX

MYSTERIES MULTIPLY

“**M**ISS BRIGGS, do you feel equal to starting back to Silver Creek?” questioned the guide as she returned. “The sooner we get away from here the better it may be for us.”

“Yes. Anything to get away from this haunt of tragedy. How far are we from there?”

“About thirty-five kilometers, I should say, though it may be more.”

Elfreda glanced at him quickly.

“Were you in service in France during the war?” she questioned.

“Yes.”

“May I ask in what capacity? You know the girls of this party were there with the Overton College unit.”

“I was with the signal corps. To return to the subject of our journey, I have a horse a short distance from here. You may ride him, and Mr. Brown and I will walk.”

“Walk! Walk thirty-five miles?” demanded Stacy in a tone that was almost a wail.

"I said thirty-five kilometers, not thirty-five miles," corrected the guide.

"I don't care which it is; thirty-five of anything is too far for me. I can't walk. I have a sore finger. I stuck it on a fishhook yesterday," protested the fat boy.

"Very well, you may remain here if you wish. Come, Miss Briggs. We must take along some of the provisions that are in the cabin."

"Mr. White found those too," thought Elfreda, then aloud: "Have we the right to do that?"

"Within reason, yes. This is a forest ranger's cabin, and one is free to help himself."

Stacy ran in and filled his pockets with cans, and the guide took a can of beans for himself and one for Miss Briggs, directing Stacy to put back all but one of those he had taken. The three then set out at a brisk walk, and at about a mile from the cabin they turned off, and soon found the horse, on which they placed the Overland girl. After mounting, she secretly tucked the canvas bag into the saddle pocket.

It was a relief to Elfreda not to have to walk, and further, it gave her opportunity to study the wiry figure of Hamilton White as he strode along in the rear of Stacy, whom he was urging along, much to that young man's freely voiced disgust.

Shortly after noon they stopped to water the horse and to give the rider an opportunity to rest. They then pressed on, for the way was rough and progress slow. It was near night when they came within hailing distance of Silver Creek village, and a great shout went up from the Overlanders when they saw Elfreda.

During the absence of the guide, the Overlanders' missing horse had come in, enabling the Overland Riders to resume their journey to the Cascade Range. It was an evening of rejoicing for them, in which the villagers joined, for the young women of the Overland party had been of great assistance to them in their trouble. Not alone that, but it was freely admitted that Ham White and the Overlanders had saved the village from destruction.

Early on the following morning, after bidding good-bye to the villagers, the Overlanders rode away. On the way, Miss Briggs told her companions of her experiences during her absence, omitting any reference to the bag of gold and the diary. Even Hamilton White had no idea that she possessed it, so far as she was aware, though Elfreda was not so certain that he did not suspect her having the bag of gold.

It was noticed by at least one of the party that Miss Briggs and the guide had little to say to each other that day; in fact, they seemed to

avoid each other. Not so with Emma Dean, who kept as close to Hamilton White as she could, hanging on his words and showing her keen interest in him in the expression of her eyes. At supper that evening, however, Elfreda asked him a direct question.

“Mr. White, have you ever heard of a stream known as Lost River?” she asked.

“I have,” spoke up Stacy Brown. “I fell in it the other night when they had the fireworks at Silver Creek village.”

“I believe there is an old Indian legend of some sort about Lost River—something to do with gold or silver,” replied the guide, giving her a swift, appraising glance.

“Is there such a thing as an Indian legend about ‘Grandma and the Children’?” persisted Elfreda.

“Ha, ha! That’s a good one. Did they fall into the foaming flood also?” demanded Chunky in a loud voice.

“Children should be seen and not heard,” rebuked Emma sternly.

“Is that why you are so quiet to-day, Miss Dean?” asked the boy.

“I am quiet, Stacy Brown, because you so disturb the atmosphere that one has to shout to make herself heard at all,” returned Emma with great dignity.

The Overlanders laughed heartily.

“I reckon that will hold you for a few moments,” interjected Hippy Wingate. “Got anything more to say on the subject, young man?”

“Not a word.”

Stacy did not even join in the laugh that followed.

By this time they had finished their supper, and Elfreda nodded to Grace to indicate that she wished to speak with her, and the two strolled off without attracting attention. They were soon out of earshot, and Grace suggested that they go no farther.

“Now what is it that is troubling you, J. Elfreda?” she asked.

“I have a guilty conscience, dear Loyalheart, and I must confess to you.”

“I knew you had something on your mind,” nodded Grace. “So far as concerns your having a guilty conscience, that is impossible. You only imagine it.”

“After you have heard my story you will think differently. Grace, you don’t know all that took place in the forest cabin—all that occurred in connection with the death of the old prospector.” Elfreda then related the story in detail, giving the real reason, as told to her by Petersen, for the attack of the

Murrays. "Have you your lamp, your pocket lamp?"

Grace produced her flashlight, and Miss Briggs, taking it from her, turned a bar of light on the diary that she had removed from her blouse.

"This is it, Grace, and here are the notes I made of what Mr. Petersen told me. I haven't read the writing in Mr. Petersen's diary—I haven't had the heart or the inclination to do so. I feel like a thief."

"Elfreda!" rebuked Grace.

"Then you think I have a right to keep this—this thing?"

"Why not? You say he has no family, no relatives. What you have shown me is, in reality, the will of a dying man. He gave you what he had in payment for your kindness to him. So far as his story of finding the lost mine is concerned, I am inclined to think it a myth. At any rate, don't trouble your head over the matter any more. The chances are that, even if the mine really exists, we never shall find it, but when Tom joins us in the Cascades I will lay the facts before him. Tom knows this country pretty well. That is why the Government is employing him to make a timber survey, and at the same time, to look into some other matters."

“But, Grace, this is going to be a terrible weight on my mind,” protested Elfreda.

“And you a successful lawyer!” laughed Grace. “I never thought that a lawyer could be so conscientious. And think of the romance of all this,” went on Grace Harlowe with growing enthusiasm. “Have you no romance in your soul?”

Miss Briggs shook her head.

“It is not given to many girls to play a leading part in a search for a lost gold mine. Even the suggestion of courting peril ought to appeal to you, Elfreda. I should like to go through the diary with care. I don’t like doing that now when we can’t see about us, as we have reason to believe that there may be people in this vicinity who would stop at nothing to obtain possession of it. Of course, we are safe here, though. What about the bag of nuggets and dust that Petersen gave you?”

“I have the bag. The contents I threw away.”

“Elfreda Briggs!” cried Grace indignantly. “Threw away a bag of gold nuggets and gold dust! Are you crazy?”

“I may be, Grace dear. When I opened the bag, after putting Mr. Petersen’s horse away, I found that it contained nothing but worthless quartz rock. There was no gold there.

The nuggets and gold dust had been taken out. Someone had stolen the nuggets and dust in the short time that I was away from the shack."

Grace uttered an exclamation.

"When Stacy and I returned to the shack, we found Mr. White sitting in the cabin. I asked him to go outside for a moment, and while he was away I got the bag. Then I made an excuse for going out into the forest. On emptying the contents of the bag into my lap I found that I was the proud possessor of only a bag of worthless stones!"

"Elfreda! You don't mean to infer that Mr. White took it—you can't think such a terrible thing of him!" begged Grace.

"I don't know what to think. He was there; he has acted peculiarly ever since, and has avoided me. Isn't it a natural thing for me at least to wonder?" demanded Miss Briggs.

"Elfreda Briggs, I am amazed!" cried Grace Harlowe. "Is that why you have been so cold and distant towards the guide? He does not deserve such treatment. Were I in your place I should, in the light of what you have told me, tell him the story that you have related to me."

"No, no!" Elfreda said with strong emphasis. "I have no reason for confiding in anyone but you. Neither shall I do anything

farther in this matter. Gold mines—gold doesn't bring happiness. Quite the contrary, so far as my experience goes."

"Yes, that is true, but after one has found happiness, gold is a mighty good thing to keep that happiness from getting wobbly. I—" Grace paused abruptly. She thought she had heard a sound close at hand. Grabbing the flashlight, she swung the bar of light about with one hand, the other hand holding the prospector's diary.

An amazing thing occurred.

The prospector's diary was whisked away from Grace Harlowe, leaving in her hand only a leaf out of it that she had held between her fingers.

"Overland!" It was the shrill rallying cry of the Overland Riders, and hearing it, they sprang to their feet and ran up, as Grace Harlowe's cry for assistance was echoing through the forest.

Ham White reached the two girls first, calling out his name as he charged to them.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Someone was here, Mr. White. At least someone or something snatched a book out of my hands. I saw no one, but am positive that I heard someone just before the occurrence," Grace informed him.

The rest of the party, with the exception of Stacy Brown, were on the scene a moment or so later, each with an eager question.

“Why, Hamilton, you went out that way a few moments before the girls were disturbed. Didn’t you see anyone?” wondered Emma.

The guide shook his head. He was regarding Grace and Elfreda with a curious expression on his face as they came within range of the campfire.

“Was the book of value?” he asked, meeting Miss Briggs’ eyes. She returned his gaze with a level glance.

“It may have been, Mr. White,” replied the girl, turning away.

Grace laughed. The incident had not disturbed her, but the mystery of it did. That a prowler could get so close to her without attracting her attention hurt her pride. Her companions were much more upset than was either of the two active participants. Stacy slept through it all, and did not awaken until morning.

It was some time after that before the camp settled down for the night, but the guide sat in the shadows, smoking his pipe and thinking.

“Did you hear what Emma said?” questioned Elfreda in a whisper to Grace as they snuggled under their blankets.

“About what?”

“About Mr. White. It seems he may have been somewhere near us out there.”

“This affair has several queer phases,” admitted Grace.

“I don’t care. I’m glad the diary is out of my hands; now I can wash them of it all, and my conscience at the same time. My gold mine has gone a-glimmering.” Elfreda laughed, but without much mirth.

“My dear J. Elfreda, you are not going to get off so easily. Here is the page on which you wrote the location of the gold mine at Mr. Petersen’s direction. I had the leaf in my hand when the book was snatched away, and it just tore itself loose and remained with me. So you see you are still fated to be a millionaire. Reason will tell you that the book may not be of value to the possessor.”

Miss Briggs asked why.

“Because,” replied Grace, “there can be nothing very definite in the diary or it would not have been necessary for Mr. Petersen to give you the definite directions that he did. The matter of real value, you will find, is on the sheet that I still have. I’ll give it to you in the morning. My advice to you is to commit those lines to memory, and then burn the slip of paper.”

“Yes. I will burn it all right,” agreed Miss Briggs. “Don’t say gold to me again to-night. I wish to sleep—to sleep peacefully.” Elfreda made good her word on the following morning, and destroyed the slip of paper.

Before the others were awake the guide went out and was away from the camp for more than an hour. He was just returning when Hippy Wingate came out.

“Find anything exciting this morning?” asked Hippy jovially.

“Yes. Someone was prowling about the camp last night. I found the spot where the young ladies were sitting, and I also found the imprints of booted feet. About a quarter of a mile to the west of us a horse was tethered, and the fellow who was here undoubtedly rode it, and went north, after leaving this vicinity. Is it your wish that I run his trail out, Lieutenant?”

“No. What’s the use? If he is particularly interested in us he will come again, and maybe he will come once too often and get caught,” suggested Hippy.

The guide bowed and went about getting breakfast. The party was in their saddles at an early hour, turning their faces toward the north, and the Cascade Range, which was their destination. It was a glorious day, and even

Hamilton White thawed under the sweet lure of the forest, and talked forest and woodcraft to his party.

They camped that night in a rocky pass, well sheltered, and with a mountain stream at their feet. Everyone was tired, and chilled from the mist that was settling over the pass. Before anything else was done, a fire was built and coffee prepared by the girls. Then Ham White began making camp, and Stacy and Lieutenant Wingate cared for the horses.

Stacy, very proud of his saddle, which he had ridden for a long time, in fact ever since he had ridden with the Pony Rider Boys on their many adventurous journeys, brought the saddle in and threw it down near the fire. Something fell out of the saddle pocket. Stacy picked it up and looked at the object frowningly.

“What’s that?” demanded Grace a little sharply.

“That? I’m blest if I know,” answered Stacy, his face showing some perplexity.

Grace took the object from him, glanced into it, and looking up at Elfreda, laughed.

“Here is the book—the diary,” announced Grace, extending it to Miss Briggs. “Remember what I told you last night? Did I not say that you would not get off so easily?”

Stacy, how did you come by this?" demanded the Overland girl, turning to the fat boy.

"What's all the fuss about? I picked it up when I went after my horse this morning and forgot all about it. Why the excitement?"

"There is no excitement," answered Miss Briggs with dignity as she tucked the old prospector's diary into her blouse. "Mr. White, Mr. Brown found the missing book and has returned it to us."

Before anyone could comment on the find or ask questions about it, Ham White held up a hand for silence.

From far away came a shot. After a little it was followed by two shots, an interval and one shot.

"A signal," announced the guide.

Hippy Wingate raised his revolver to fire.

"Stop!" commanded Ham White. "Let the other fellow do the shooting. We aren't certain that we want to know him." There was meaning in the guide's words, a warning, and the Overlanders fell silent. There was also the vivid memory with Elfreda and Grace of the mysterious hand that had snatched the prospector's diary, and both girls felt an intuition of other mysteries to come.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN FROM SEATTLE

“SOMEONE is coming,” announced Grace, when, half an hour later, her keen ears detected a sound, faint, though unmistakable. She was the only one of the party to hear it at that instant, though a moment later the guide nodded.

The Overlanders saw him hitch his revolver holster into convenient position as he stood up and leaned easily against a tree.

“As I was saying,” he began. “Sometimes it rains and sometimes it snows, and—”

“Hands up!” rang out a sudden command. “Put ’em up till I look you over.”

Stacy Brown was the only one of the party that obeyed the command. The Overlanders were too much interested in the newcomer to obey the command, for he was fantastically clad. The fellow was holding two revolvers which he kept moving from side to side, his keen eyes regarding the party appraisingly as well as alertly. It was his clothing that attracted most attention, for the man was dressed

like a Mexican rancher, with the velvet jacket, embroidered with silver, the broad sombrero, likewise embellished with silver, and the faint metallic tinkle of silver spurs was heard as he shifted his position.

The keen expression in his eyes changed to a twinkle.

“Well, well, who would have thought it!” he exclaimed. “A bunch of foozleheads.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Stacy Brown. “Foozleheads! That is a brand new one. Emma, he is looking at you.”

The newcomer lowered his weapons and shoved them into their holsters.

“Well, who are you?” demanded Ham White. “You appear to be a new specimen up here.”

“Who, me? Haven’t you heard of me? I’m Jim Haley, sole representative of the International Peanut Company in the State of Washington. I’m known as the Man from Seattle, and I’ll have peanuts in every home, in every bandit cave in the great preserves of the State, and all over the rugged peaks of the Cascades if I hold out long enough. Peanuts are a great civilizer; they are the oil on troubled waters, and if the wild men up here were to eat enough of them I’ll guarantee that they never would hold up another unfortunate traveler.”

“Bandits?” questioned the guide, regarding the visitor narrowly.

“Yes. They’ve held me up twice in twenty-four hours, and the last time they took my horse away.”

“It strikes me that you are quite handy with hold-up methods yourself,” observed Hippy Wingate.

“Peanuts? Peanuts?” demanded Stacy eagerly. “Got any with you?”

“It will be my everlasting regret that I have not. You see I ate up most of my samples, then the bandits took the rest of them. This is a rotten country. I had to get food, and when I smelled your smoke I took a chance, not knowing whether or not I was running into another bunch of bandits, and here I am, safe and sound. Luck is with the Man from Seattle, the greatest peanut salesman in the world. I’ll have a cup of coffee, if you please, and anything else that’s lying around loose, then I shall be delighted to take your orders for peanuts to be delivered at your homes, freight paid, and an extra bag gratis for good luck.”

“Why, certainly, you shall have something to eat,” promised Grace. “Girls, help me rustle some grub for our caller. Were you lost?”

“Lost? Why, I’ve never found myself since

I came into the forest. How could a man, who never has known where he was at, be lost? Been held up by these mountain ruffians yet?"

The Overlanders shook their heads.

"They are so sudden. Why, they wouldn't even give me an opportunity to demonstrate—"

"Demonstrate!" cried Emma with sudden interest. "Do you demonstrate, Mr. Hart—"

"Haley, if you please," interjected the newcomer.

"Really, do you, Mr. Haley?"

"Of course I do."

"Isn't that perfectly lovely! You see, girls, I am not the only one that demonstrates to ward off trouble. Just think, think hard, that something you desire very much, will be, and it will be."

The Man from Seattle looked puzzled for a moment, then he laughed heartily.

"Demonstrate a bag of peanuts for me, then," spoke up Stacy Brown.

"That's it, young man—it's peanuts that I demonstrate. I'll see that you get a fair sample when I get back to Seattle," promised Haley.

"Oh, fudge! Everything is food with you, Stacy Brown. Why can't you be less gross, and more spiritual?" complained Emma.

"I presume it is the company I keep, and—"

“Your supper is ready, Mr. Haley,” called Grace.

The peanut man did full justice to the meal prepared for him, and, while he ate, the Overlanders plied him with questions. Ham White sat back and regarded their guest with interest. White was keen, and little escaped his alert eyes.

“That fellow is bluffing!” was his mental comment. “I wonder what his game is.”

“Now that you have no horse, what are you going to do?” asked Hippy.

“Sell peanuts! I’ll take your orders now.”

The peanut man did, and when he had finished, each member of the party had given him an order for a bag of peanuts, Stacy being the only one whose order was a gift. From then on until bedtime the visitor rattled on, keeping the party convulsed with laughter. In the conversations that followed the evening’s entertainment, Jim Haley succeeded in drawing from them the story of their experiences in the brief time that they had been out, and discovered that he was not talking with green-horns.

Mr. Haley was particularly interested in Miss Briggs’ experiences with the bandits at the ranger cabin, and questioned her in detail as to the appearances of the riders.

“Probably the same fellows that held me up,” he observed, stroking his chin. “You say the old prospector had something that they wanted to get possession of?” he asked, turning to Elfreda.

She answered with a slight incline of the head.

“What was it?” The question was direct and incisively put.

“Being a lawyer, and having my client’s interests at heart, I decline to permit her to answer,” returned Elfreda, which brought a hearty laugh from the party, Jim Haley laughing more loudly than any of the others.

Hamilton White’s face hardened ever so little.

“Your questions are rather personal, and I must ask you to be more discreet,” he rebuked.

“A thousand pardons!” bowed the visitor. “For this indiscretion, I shall include some handsome oil paintings, which we give only to big jobbers with large orders for International Peanuts Products, when I fill the orders you have been so magnanimous as to favor me with.”

“That’s a mighty indigestible word, that magnanimous thing. Don’t put anything like that in the shipment with my peanuts,” declared Stacy.

“You don’t mean to say you don’t know the meaning of that word?” exclaimed Nora.

“Can’t say that I do,” answered Stacy carelessly. “What does it mean, Emma?”

“Your education has been neglected. Any schoolboy ought to know the meaning of a word so common as that,” returned Emma airily.

“All right, you tell us. I’ll swallow whatever you say—once!”

“Why, magnanimous means—it means—it means— Pshaw, I know what it means perfectly well, but somehow I can’t properly explain it.” Emma’s face was growing red. “Oh, Hamilton, you tell my ignorant companion what—”

“Ha, ha, ha!” chortled the fat boy. “You tell him, Hamilton.”

Grace and Elfreda were laughing immoderately, and Hippy was chuckling to himself. All knew that Miss Dean knew the meaning of the word, but that Stacy, with his question, had confused her.

“I believe the dictionary explains it as being elevated in soul,” answered the guide smilingly.

“Oh, Hamilton, isn’t that wonderful?” breathed Emma. “It sounds so utterly poetic.”

“You wouldn’t think so were you to swallow

it with a bag of peanuts," grumbled the fat boy.

And after the laughter had subsided, Grace announced that she was tired and said she would turn in.

"Do we make an early start in the morning, Mr. White?" she asked, turning smilingly towards the guide.

"Yes, if that is agreeable to you, Mrs. Gray," was the courteous reply. The easy grace of this man, and the evident culture that was beneath the surface, had puzzled Grace Harlowe from the beginning. There was that about him that was mysterious, unfathomable. These thoughts were in the Overland girl's mind as she turned towards the little tent which she and Elfreda occupied together.

"By the way, Mr. Haley," she added, halting at the tent opening, "Mr. White will fix you up for the night with a blanket. If you will bunk in with Lieutenant Wingate, there is room. Mr. White prefers to sleep in the open."

"So do I. In the vast open, with the ambient atmosphere enveloping me like a blanket, I can ponder over the psychology of merchandising peanuts better than when I am shut in. All nature assists, the saplings sap and seep into my brain, into my subconscious being, and the

leaves leave their native habitat to come to my aid, and—”

“One can’t blame them so much for that,” observed Emma. “Good-night, Mr. Haley; good-night, Hamilton; good-night, all.”

“Either that man is a lunatic or else he is a big fraud,” declared Elfreda, entering the tent. “Which is it?”

“Just another mystery, that is all,” answered Grace good-naturedly. “Why worry about him?”

“I don’t. I have sufficient troubles of my own to keep me from sleeping soundly.”

By this time the others were turning in; the visitor had already rolled himself up in a blanket with feet to the fire, and Ham White was out seeing that the ponies were secure for the night. He remained out there for a long time, looking up at the tree tops, dimly discernible in the faint light. At the same time he appeared to be listening, now and then glancing back at the silent figure of Jim Haley.

At last the guide turned and strode back into camp, and threw his blanket down beside Haley. But White did not lie down at once. Instead, he crouched down beside the visitor and peered down into the man’s face. A pair of twinkling eyes were gazing up at him.

“You are awake, eh? I rather thought you

would be. Now who are you, and what is your game? Out with it or out you go!"

"Who am I? I am G 16, and I want to talk with you!" Haley's voice sank to a whisper as he made the mysterious announcement.

Ham White uttered an exclamation, then, quickly collecting himself, he lay down on his blanket close to the peanut salesman, and for the next half hour the two men spoke in earnest tones, tones too low for the Overlanders to hear.

It was long after midnight, when, had one been awake, he might have discovered a shadowy figure slinking along at the rear of the camp. It first paused at the tent occupied by Hippy and Stacy, then crept on all fours to the one in which Grace and Elfreda were sleeping. These little tents were open at both ends, though they could be closed in the event of a storm, and a person at either end, by peering closely, could see the heads and faces of the occupants.

Inch by inch the shadow, now flat on the ground, wriggled towards the two sleeping girls. A lean hand reached cautiously under, first Grace's pillow, then under Elfreda's. The pillows were pneumatic pillows that were filled with air before retiring, and were soft and comfortable, as well as sensitive to the touch.

The pressure of the shadow's hand under the pillow disturbed Elfreda Briggs, and her eyes slowly opened, but she did not move, believing that the hand belonged to her companion. A sidelong glance, however, told her that Grace's back was towards her, therefore the hand could not belong to her. Elfreda's next thought was that Stacy Brown was trying to play pranks on her.

In the meantime the hand crept slowly about under the pillow. It was time to act, and Miss Briggs, half raising herself on one elbow, made a grab for it. She grasped a bare muscular arm.

"Overland!" cried the girl, and the familiar thrilling call of distress awakened every person in the camp with the exception of Stacy Brown. Then darkness overwhelmed Elfreda and she knew no more.

Grace, awakened by the cry, threw her arms about the neck of her companion.

"Elfreda! Elfreda! What is it?"

There was no reply.

"Overland! Quick! Something has happened to Elfreda!" she cried, springing from her blanket, as the quick, sharp report of a revolver smote the ears of the campers.

CHAPTER XI

BELIEVERS IN SAFETY FIRST

BANG! BANG! BANG! The air seemed filled with explosions of rifles and revolvers, and the Overland camp was in an uproar in a moment, even Stacy Brown rousing himself sufficiently to sit up and take quick notice. The instant the shooting began Stacy, concluding that his services were not needed, lay down with his blanket drawn up over his head.

“Safety first,” muttered the boy as a bullet tore a hole through his little dog tent. “Wow! I wonder what all the excitement is about?”

Grace and Stacy were the only ones of the outfit who had not run out following the alarm. Grace had turned her pocket lamp on Elfreda’s face. It was a pallid face that she looked upon.

“Elfreda! Elfreda! What is it?” begged Grace. “Oh, what is it?”

Miss Briggs was breathing, but was unconscious.

The shooting died away as suddenly as it had started, and then Emma and Nora ran to

Grace's tent, crying out to know what had happened.

"I don't know, girls. Please hold the light so I can examine her. I heard Elfreda scream, then came the shooting, and that is all I know about it," answered Grace. Her nimble fingers ran over her companion's head, neck and shoulders, for Grace's experience in the hospital service in France had not only made her efficient in emergencies, but had taught her to keep her own self well in hand.

"Ah! Here it is."

"Wha—what!" gasped Nora.

"A lump on the top of her head, well down near the forehead. She has been dealt a heavy blow, but with what, I can't say. Fetch water. We must try to revive her."

Lieutenant Hippy Wingate came running up at this juncture, revolver in hand.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Elfreda has been knocked out," Nora told him.

"With what?"

"I don't know, Hippy," spoke up Grace. "Please go away. This is no place for you. Stand by in case we need you. Where is the guide?"

"He is trying to find out if there are prowlers about here. I think he found someone, for

I heard a man yell," Hippy informed them as he left the tent.

Reviving Elfreda was a matter of only a few minutes after they began bathing her face and rubbing her body. Grace then uttered a sigh of relief.

"What—what happened to you?" stammered Emma.

"Don't question her now. Can't you see that she is weak?" rebuked Grace. "Lie perfectly quiet, dear. You can talk later," admonished Grace, as Miss Briggs indicated that she had something to say. "You girls had better step out and give us a few moments' quiet," she advised. "Hippy, if it is prudent, you had better start up the fire," she called. "We must have light and warm water. Where is Stacy?"

Hippy said he had not seen the fat boy, and then went straight to Stacy's tent, where he found him still practicing safety first. Hippy dragged Stacy out by the feet.

"Leggo! Wow!" howled Stacy. "Oh, it's you, is it?" he added. "What do you mean by waking up a fellow like this? Anything wrong?" he questioned innocently.

"Oh, no; nothing at all. Everything is peaceful and quiet. You get out and help me build a fire, and be lively about it, too. I'm not in the mood to trifle with you."

While Hippy and Stacy were building a fire, the two girls, Emma and Nora, got water to be heated. Grace bathed Miss Briggs' feet in the hot water, for the injured girl was in a chill. A lump of sizable proportions had formed on her head. This was dressed by Grace, and in a short time Miss Briggs was asleep. Grace then stepped outside to her companions who were standing about the fire.

"Hasn't Mr. White come in yet?" she demanded.

"I haven't seen him. Has J. Elfreda said anything yet?" questioned Hippy.

"Not about what happened. If she awakens again, and is then able to talk, I will question her. Please let me know when Mr. White comes in."

It was some time later when the guide returned. Elfreda had been awake from her brief sleep long enough to tell Grace what she knew of the occurrence.

"Mr. White, what do you know about this?" asked Grace.

"Not a thing. The first I knew of anything being wrong was when someone called, followed by a cry. I think it was Miss Briggs who first cried out."

Grace nodded.

"As I got on my feet I saw a man running,

and knowing that it could be none of our party running away, I fired at him. I don't think I hit him. He returned the fire, but at that juncture Lieutenant Wingate began shooting. Lieutenant, I'll say you aren't slow about getting into action. It was bully. Then I chased the man and he and I both emptied our revolvers at each other. One of us hit him—"

"It was your shot, Ham," interrupted Hippy. "I wasn't shooting when he cried out."

"Then you didn't get the fellow?" demanded Grace, addressing the guide.

"No. He got away. I wish it had been daylight. That is all I can tell you. May I ask what Miss Briggs has to say of the attack on her?"

"She says she felt something moving under her pillow, and after waiting a moment she became convinced that a hand was searching there. She made a grab for the hand and caught a man's arm and then lost consciousness."

"Fright?" asked the guide.

"Fright! No. A blow on the head, Mr. White. I think the fellow must have brought his fist down, for the injury doesn't look as if it had been done with a stick or an instrument. That is all she knows about it, sir."

“Was anything taken—did she have anything under her pillow?” persisted White.

“Yes. That little canvas bag she carries. There was nothing of value in it. There may have been some small change there, for most of her money was in her money belt around her waist. The other things in the bag were such toilet articles as we all carry to use while riding—and a little powder,” added Grace smilingly. “Mere men don’t understand those things.”

“Thieves!” cried Stacy. “Oh, wow!” The fat boy ran to his tent and feverishly searched his clothing. He was back in a few moments. “I knew it! The thief didn’t dare tackle a real man. You see, he picked out weak women. He knew better than to trifle with Stacy Brown.”

“Even if Stacy Brown did hide under a blanket when the show opened,” supplemented Lieutenant Wingate. “I presume, if Elfreda had not given the alarm, the man would have gone through all our belongings.”

Ham White was pacing up and down. They could see that he was disturbed.

“The low-down cur!” he breathed, clenching his fists, his face set and slightly paler than usual.

“Hamilton! Hamilton! Don’t disturb

yourself so," begged Emma solicitously. "Be calm, do. I will demonstrate for you."

"Aw, let the peanut man do the demonstrating," jeered Stacy. "Your demonstrating might do at a family picnic, but up here it is punk!"

White gave no heed to Emma's sympathetic words. He stood with lowered chin thinking.

"The peanut man!" cried Nora.

"Yes. Where *is* Mr. Haley, Mr. White?" demanded Grace.

"I don't know, Mrs. Gray," replied the guide slowly. "I thought he was sleeping beside me when I sprang up. I haven't seen him since," added Ham White, bending over to poke the fire.

The Overlanders looked at each other, and each knew what the other was thinking about.

"Some demonstrator, that fellow," observed Stacy Brown. "I'm mighty glad that he didn't demonstrate over that fifty-cent piece in my trousers pocket."

CHAPTER XII

A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT

“WE might as well move on,” advised Grace. “To-morrow will be Sunday, and we ought to find a good camping place for that day, and have a day of rest.”

“Does Miss Briggs feel able to ride?” asked Ham White.

“Yes. Her head naturally is still quite sore, but otherwise she is as fit as any of us. It takes a lot to put J. Elfreda Briggs out of commission,” added Grace laughingly.

“That it does,” agreed Elfreda herself, emerging from her tent with a head bandage like a turban.

The party were just gathering for breakfast on the morning after the attack on Elfreda. She was a little pale, but wholly herself. The Overlanders all shook hands with her as she came out, Ham White among the number, and, for the instant of the hand-clasp, their eyes met, each seeking in the fleeting look to read the secret of the other's reserve.

“I have been out since break of day, following the trail of our prowler,” announced White. “There was more than one man involved in the game, whatever it was. They had horses, three horses, and there must have been that many men involved, though only one man entered the camp. The probabilities are that they reasoned one man would stand a better chance to carry out their plan without detection than would a bunch of them, and they undoubtedly were right. One of our shots, as I said last night, hit the fellow, for I found a trail of blood drops. Their trail shows that he had to be assisted to his saddle, and that a companion rode along at his side when they went away.”

“Oh, Hamilton. Did you demonstrate all of that?” begged Emma, her eyes filled with admiration.

“I read the trail, that’s all,” replied the guide. “If that is demonstrating, I demonstrated.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Stacy.

“Stacy Brown, you are a young ruffian!” cried Emma indignantly.

“I know it.”

“Besides, you show the most abject cowardice whenever courage is called for. Why not be like Mr. White, afraid of nothing?”

“I suppose Ham’s a hero, eh?”

“Yes, you know he is,” agreed Emma, her face relaxing into a happy smile.

“Well, he didn’t do anything to save Elfreda’s life, did he?”

“Perhaps not directly. Indirectly he did.”

“Then I am the heroest hero of the two. Elfreda, didn’t I save your life—directly—when that bandit was shooting at—” Stacy checked himself. “I leave it to this honorable bunch if I am not entitled to the cross of war with all the palms on it that the old thing will hold. I demand a rising vote.”

All except Emma got up, and all were laughing heartily.

“Carried! We will now proceed to replenish the coal bin,” announced Stacy, resuming his breakfast.

Emma had nothing further to say to him, though Stacy regarded her with large, soulful eyes during most of the meal. Following breakfast, the men of the party broke camp and rolled the packs, and in a very short time they were on their way.

Grace and Elfreda rode side by side, Grace wishing to see to it that her companion did not overdo herself.

“I haven’t had an opportunity to ask you if the thief got anything of value?” asked Grace.

“No. The diary was not in the bag. I put it under my money belt when I turned in,” Elfreda informed her.

“Good for you! I have been thinking that you and I should look through that book carefully, and if there be information of value in it, we should make a copy of it. You keep the original and I will keep the copy.”

Miss Briggs said she didn’t care much what happened to the diary, save that she did not like the idea of being beaten.

“I hope I am too good a lawyer to give up a case until the jury has brought in a verdict against me. Then, after I have carried it to the higher court and have been defeated there, then I’m beaten. But not until then. What about the peanut man? Grace, is he the guilty one?”

“Ask Hamilton White. He knows,” was the low-spoken reply.

“Why do you say that?”

“From the expression of his face when I asked about Haley. There is something about those men that I do not clearly understand.”

Elfreda averred that there were several “somethings” that needed clearing up.

“My dear Elfreda, we are involved in so many mysteries that, first thing we know, we will be accusing each other. To-morrow being Sunday, I suggest that we go over the diary—

get off somewhere by ourselves and make a thorough job of it," suggested Grace, to which Elfreda agreed with a nod.

Grace, at this juncture, turned in her saddle to see what had become of Stacy, who had been lagging behind all the morning. He was not in sight when she looked, but the next time she turned he was observed back some distance, riding off the trail a little way, leaning over and catching bushes in his hands.

"I wonder what mischief that boy is up to now?" murmured Grace. "Surely he is not doing that solely for exercise."

"Don't you think he needs exercise?" questioned Miss Briggs with a smile.

Grace's answer was a laugh.

"Nevertheless I owe Stacy Brown an obligation that I never can repay," added Elfreda gravely, and to this Grace gave an emphatic assent.

The day's journey was without incident, and was thoroughly enjoyed. Many trails were crossed, some of which Hamilton White halted to examine, and then proceeded on his way without comment, unless he gave an opinion to Hippy Wingate who was riding beside him. Emma Dean kept as close to the guide as possible, and watched him as though fearing that he might get away from her. The guide, how-

ever, gave only the most ordinary attention to Emma, just as he did to the others of the party.

“Is there much gold up this way, or is it a myth?” Hippy was asking him, as the fat boy continued with his operations at the rear of the line of horses.

“There undoubtedly is plenty of it if one knew where or how to find it. I never did, never expect to, and don’t know that I should care to. In my experience I have learned that not only is gold an elusive substance, but that it seldom brings the finder happiness. Ordinarily it brings him disaster, even death!”

“Whew! You talk like an actor playing in a tragedy,” observed Lieutenant Wingate.

The guide grinned and resumed his study of the trail. Hippy had thought there might be opportunity to draw Hamilton White out as to his career. The Overlander was positive that it would prove an interesting story, but no opportunity presented itself on this occasion, so Hippy prudently kept his questions to himself. Emma, however, kept up an almost continuous chatter all the morning and most of the afternoon.

As the day waned, they began urging their horses to a faster pace, White explaining that he wished to reach a certain camp-site that day.

He said it would make an ideal Sunday rest camp.

“Do you think we shall be safe there?” questioned Emma. “Oh, I hope so, Hamilton.”

“As safe there as anywhere up here—perhaps more so, for we shall be on high ground where nothing can get to us, at least in daylight, without our observing the approach.”

“You know the place, then?” suggested Hippy. “Have you been there before?”

“No.” The answer was brief and final, and Hippy wondered how Ham could know about a particular spot in the forest, and lead them directly to it if he never had been there. Hippy could find no answer to that.

The Overland Riders reached the site just before sundown. The country about them was mountainous and heavily forested. Back of the camp towered a huge rock. A little way from it was a smooth level spot, and bubbling from the rock itself there came a stream of water almost at ice temperature, as they discovered when drinking cups were brought and all hands helped themselves.

“Oh!” cried Grace. “Is there any drink in the world to equal it?”

“Not now,” answered Hippy Wingate.

“And never has been,” nodded Miss Briggs. The guide gave expression to a wry smile

and went on about his work of preparing for a week-end camp. Lieutenant Wingate attended to the unloading, the equipment being piled in orderly manner, and, after a time, Stacy was prodded into assisting him.

“Mercy! What a peculiar odor there is here,” exclaimed Grace. “Don’t you smell it, girls?”

Nora, Emma and Elfreda sniffed the air.

“Hippy, what is it? Don’t you smell something disagreeable?” demanded Nora.

“Now that you speak of it, I do. Stacy, see if you can find anything dead about here.”

“The place is all dead,” growled the fat boy. “No excitement, no nothing. But there may be, there may be.”

“May be what?” asked Hippy, regarding the boy keenly.

“Oh, nothing much. I was just thinking.” Stacy avoided Hippy’s eyes, for his was a guilty conscience. Stacy Brown had been making an experiment, but as yet he did not know whether or not it was going to produce satisfactory results. He saw Hamilton White give him a slanting glance out of the corners of his eyes, and got busy at once unrolling packs and laying out the tents. This alone should have been sufficient to arouse the suspicion of the Overland Riders, for the fat boy never worked

unless for some particular reason of his own. The others of the party were too busy to notice him, and after a time they became used to the strange odor, faint at times and then strong, as the evening breeze stirred it into life.

At supper, however, they did find it most unpleasant, and Lieutenant Wingate discovered that the odor was always more noticeable in the vicinity of Stacy, but he made no comment. The guide some time before that had made a similar discovery.

Immediately after the evening meal, Mr. White made a survey of their surroundings, including a visit to the top of the big rock. From there he found what he expected to find, an excellent view of the mountains and the forest for many miles about, but the light was fading, and he deferred further survey until the morning when the light would be right to see much farther.

The Riders were tired after their long day's ride, so all hands turned in early, and were asleep in a few moments, except the fat boy. Stacy, by frequent pinchings of himself, and chuckling over the fun he might have were his experiment to prove a success, managed to keep awake.

Giving his companions ample time to sink into a profound sleep, the fat boy crept from

his blanket, moving very cautiously so as not to awaken Hippy Wingate. Once outside he took a long look at the form of Hamilton White who lay rolled in his blanket near the campfire, for the air was now chill. White was plainly asleep.

Stacy crept to Grace's tent, then to the one occupied by Nora and Emma, pausing for a moment at each and performing some peculiar motions. It would have been difficult for anyone to even guess at what the boy might be up to.

"I'd like to give that guide fellow a dose, too," muttered the fat boy, again pausing for a long look at White. "I reckon I'd better let well enough alone, though."

Stacy got back to his own tent without awakening a single member of the party.

"Humph!" he muttered. "Sleepy-heads, all. Anybody could walk in here and steal them without awakening a single person. I don't believe anything is going to happen at all. That fellow down at Cresco is a fake, and I'll be even with him when we get back there. I'll get my money back or—or—" Stacy Brown's eyes closed, his mutterings became mere murmurs and then ceased altogether. He, too, was sound asleep, the biggest sleepy-head of them all.

It was several hours after that that something happened.

Emma Dean uttered a terrified scream, and Nora Wingate, suddenly awakened, screamed louder than Emma did. The two girls bounded from their beds and ran from the tent hysterically crying for help.

“Hamilton! Oh, Hamilton!” cried Emma.

The guide had sprung to his feet at the first scream. Grace and Elfreda were only a few seconds behind him.

“Merciful heaven! What is it?” cried Miss Briggs, as her eyes saw what appeared to be a huge form at the tent entrance.

Both girls ran out at the other end of the tent, then Hamilton White’s rifle spoke, waking the echoes of the forest, just as Stacy Brown ran from his own tent in a terrible fright.

“Oh, wow, wow, wow!” howled the fat boy. “He got me, he did.”

Stacy’s experiment had proved an entire success, and he had fallen a victim to his own prank.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP IS INVADED

“DON’T run. Keep together back of me. Lieutenant, look out for the rear. I’ll take care of the rest,” shouted the guide.

“What is it? Hamilton, what is it?” cried Emma.

“Bears!” answered Grace Harlowe. “I never saw so many in all my life. What does it mean?”

The camp was full of the beasts. They were ambling swiftly here and there, growling, sniffing, pawing, and apparently without fear. This, as some of the party knew, was not like the ways of the black bear. Ordinarily a black bear cannot get away from man quickly enough. Even the discharge of the guide’s rifle did not put the invaders to flight.

“Fire into their legs, Lieutenant,” directed White. “We don’t want to kill them if we can avoid it. Besides, it is against the law.”

The two men let loose with their rifles at the feet of the beasts, but in the faint light aim was

uncertain, and it was only occasionally that a grunt indicated that an animal had been hit.

Out in the bushes the ponies were snorting in fright. Stacy suddenly uttered a yell as a bear ran between his legs and threw him down. From the way the bear got away from him it was evident that the beast was as badly frightened as was the fat boy. The swift work of White and Hippy was having its effect, too, and here and there a dark form was observed ambling away into the forest.

“Now! All together. We’ve got them going!” cried Ham White. “Be careful that you don’t shoot towards the ponies.”

Stacy ran for his rifle, and a moment later he, too, was firing away, and continued to fire until he was pulling the trigger on empty chambers, but his assistance was no longer needed.

“I think they are all out now,” announced the guide. “I suspect that we shall have some bear meat for breakfast just the same, but we can’t help it. A man has a right to defend himself, though I always try to keep within the law. Lieutenant, keep the camp clear while I build a fire so we can see what we have.”

The coals of the evening fire were still smouldering, and it was the work of but a few moments to start a blaze large enough to light up the camp. The bears had torn and uprooted

two tents and worked other havoc. The camp was in a mess.

Hippy circled the camp.

"We got one of the beasts, a small one," he called. "Sure we'll have bear meat for breakfast."

White hurried to him.

"Nice fat fellow, too. We will dress him, and then we shall have to guard the carcass or there will be none of it left by morning."

"I think I'll turn in, now that the excitement is all over," announced Stacy at this juncture.

"You will not. You will assist us to prepare the carcass or you get no bear steak for breakfast."

"I don't care. I prefer venison anyway. Bear meat is too coarse for Emma and me. We prefer something lighter, more spiritual."

"*More* is the meat of your argument, as usual," flung back Miss Dean.

With Hippy's assistance the bear was hung up from a pole which was thrust through its hocks, and White began deftly skinning it. The animal was then dressed and left to cool.

The guide was perspiring freely and so was Hippy.

"Good work, Lieutenant. I reckon this isn't the first time you have dressed bear," approved the guide.

“What now?” asked Hippy.

“You people had better go to bed. I shall sit up, for we may look for visitors before daylight.”

“Visitors!” cried the Overlanders.

“Yes,” answered White, smiling. “You will hear them, and after their arrival there will be little sleep in this outfit.”

Hippy decided to remain on watch with the guide.

“Oh, Mr. Brown!”

Stacy, on his way to his tent, halted at the guide’s call.

“Well, what is it?”

“Suppose you come over and tell us about it, so that we may laugh at the joke, too.”

All eyes were turned on the fat boy.

“I’m going to bed,” protested Stacy sourly.

“Not now you are not,” decided Hippy sternly. “You come here. Now, Mr. White, go on with the entertainment. I suspect we are going to hear something. In fact, I already have a sneaking suspicion that there has been something shady in this bear affair.”

“Where did you get the stuff?” began White.

“What stuff?”

“The bear-bait that you have been distributing along the way and in camp?”

“I—I did—”

“Stacy!” rebuked Emma. “Be a good little George Washington now, and confess to Hamilton that you cut down the cherry tree.”

“I realized that there was something familiar in the odor that we detected here last evening, but I could not place it. That odor is here now. It is bear-bait, and we have you to thank for our unexpected Sunday dinner,” accused Ham White.

“Stacy Brown! Did you do that?” demanded Nora severely.

“Well, it was this way,” admitted the fat boy.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you had the urge to do this terrible thing so that I might demonstrate over you?” begged Emma.

“Oh, demonstrate over the wild animals.”

“That is what I have suggested,” reminded Emma. “The wild animal did not give me the cue.”

“Go on, young man,” urged Hippy.

“I—I thought some bear meat might be appreciated by you folks, and of course I knew we couldn’t shoot bear, as it is out of season, unless we had to get rid of them. I—”

“Close your throttle! You are on the wrong division,” commanded Hippy. “Where did you get that stuff—I mean the stuff that you planted to call the bears?”

“Down at Cresco. I was talking with an old hunter who told me that he used bear-bait, and could call bear to him at any time. He said I must plaster it along the trail on bushes, and a few hours afterwards the bear would come right to the camp, that you didn’t have to hunt them at all. That is the way to hunt—wait for them to come to you. It is so much simpler. Well, he had some of it and was willing to sell it to me for five cart wheels—”

“Five what?” interrupted Nora.

“Cart wheels—dollars. I thought I had been stuck, but I wasn’t, was I?” chuckled the fat boy. “Wait! I have some of it left in a can. I’ll get it and show it to you,” offered Stacy, turning to run to his tent.

“No!” shouted the Overlanders.

Hippy grabbed the fat boy and hauled him back.

“We aren’t finished with you yet. Go on with the story. It is interesting,” averred Hippy.

“I waited till you were all asleep, then I plastered the tents, and then went to sleep. You know the rest. It worked, didn’t it?”

“It did,” agreed the guide. Ham White’s eyes were twinkling.

“Stacy Brown, aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” cried Nora Wingate.

“Ashamed? No, of course not. I am proud

of myself. The trouble with you folks is that you have no sense of humor. Even a Britisher would laugh at this. I haven't had time to laugh for myself, but I am going to now."

Stacy did. He laughed uproariously and long, but there was little mirth in his laughter. His motive was to put his companions in a frame of mind that would make it easier for him, for Stacy secretly feared they would take sweet revenge on him for his prank.

A brief period of silence followed the fat boy's laughter, then the Overlanders broke loose. Theirs was real mirth, and their laugh lasted longer.

"Well, what are we going to do with him?" demanded Hippy.

"I reckon the young man is right about our lack of a sense of humor," agreed Ham. "We have had our laugh; we have some fine meat for to-morrow, and we have had some excitement with no harm done except a little loss of sleep and a somewhat mussed-up camp. My suggestion is that if Mr. Brown will go bury that can of bear-bait, then sleep out in the woods to-night, we will let him off this time. Well?"

"I'll bury the stuff, yes, but I won't sleep out in the woods. The bears might get me," objected Stacy. "One tried to, in my tent."

“That is exactly the point that Hamilton is making,” spoke up Emma. “Sleep out in the woods, by all means.”

A long, wailing cry echoed through the forest.

“Mercy! What’s that?” cried Nora.

“The coyotes have scented the fresh meat,” answered White. “They will all be here soon, and some other beasts, too. Are you folks game for a sight that will thrill you—that will show you the savagery of nature let loose?” he asked quickly.

“Yes!” agreed the Overlanders eagerly. They did not know what he proposed to do, but were ready for anything that he might suggest as a diversion.

“Get your belongings, blankets, and such things as you don’t care to lose. We men will get the horses, and—”

“Oh, have a heart!” begged Stacy. “What! Ride at this time of night? I prefer to stay in camp.”

“You may,” agreed the guide.

Stacy sat down and regarded the preparations sourly, but when he saw that his companions really were going to leave him, he ran for his pony and his equipment. It was but a short time later that the party filed out of camp, leading their horses, stepping out at a brisk walk, for White was in some haste.

After proceeding several hundred yards from the camp, the guide halted.

“Tie your stock, and tie them securely, for we shall have to leave them here alone for a time,” he directed.

This having been done, the party gathered together, waiting for Ham White to direct them what to do next.

“We will wait here for the present,” he said.

Five, ten minutes of tense silence passed; then a long mournful howl resounded through the forest. It was answered by other howls farther away, then a scream brought rustlings in the tree-tops where the birds stirred restlessly.

“They’re coming. Move forward cautiously; make no loud noises and be careful where you step. No one is to use a weapon unless I tell him to do so. Come!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE BATTLE OF THE BEASTS

“OH, HAMILTON!” said Emma, as she placed a trembling hand on the arm of the guide.

“Be quiet,” he admonished.

The howls were coming nearer with the seconds, it seemed. There were suggestive rustlings, and the faint sound of padded feet on the soft ground somewhere to the right of the party.

The sensations of the Overland Riders were not wholly delightful, and their nerves were tense and on edge.

The howls of the coyotes were mingled with snarls, and between themselves and the faint light of the campfire the Overlanders now made out slinking shadows.

“Mother of Mercy! What does it all mean?” murmured Nora Wingate.

“The coyotes are here,” Grace informed her. “Don’t be alarmed. They cannot harm us if we keep together and don’t get panic-stricken.”

“Silence, please!” ordered White. “We will proceed. Pick your way.”

They had reached a point further on when the guide halted them.

“Look!” he said in a low tone of voice.

The Overlanders gazed on a scene such as they had never gazed upon before.

A pack of coyotes were milling and snarling at the carcass of the suspended bear. They were leaping and rending the bear’s flesh, springing upon each other in their frenzy, biting and tearing their fellows.

A long-drawn howl from the forest was followed by a chorus of yelps. The air seemed full of hoarse wails.

“Wolves!” announced the guide briefly. “You can talk now. Your voices can’t be heard by those beasts with all this uproar. How do you like it?”

“It is terrible!” murmured Elfreda.

“Perhaps, but that is the way, not only of the beasts, but of man, though man is more cruel. Life is a survival of the fittest. Look at the trees and you have the answer. The tall ones are the vigorous ones; the runts—”

The guide was interrupted by a scream that was almost human in its quality.

“Ah! Now we shall see something worth while. Watch!” he warned.

What seemed to be a big ball of fur came hurtling from a tree, landing right among the coyotes. Then followed the maddest battle and the noisiest one that any member of the Overland party, with the possible exception of Ham White, had ever seen.

“See the big cat give it to them!” cried the guide.

“The—the cat!” stammered Emma.

“Yes. That’s a mountain lion, which, as a matter of fact, is not a lion at all.”

The girls were too thrilled with the scene before them to give heed to his words.

The battle was brief, but when the lion finally leaped away with a large chunk of meat in his jaws, three coyotes lay stretched out on the ground. Whether the lion had killed them, or whether their own fellows had done the deed, the eyes of the Overlanders had not been quick enough to perceive. Now that they were rid of their enemy, the coyotes returned to their savage feast.

“Say! You aren’t going to let those beasts eat up all our meat, are you?” demanded Stacy. “I want some of that meat myself.”

“Is there any danger to us, Mr. White?” questioned a voice in the guide’s ear.

He turned quickly, to find Miss Briggs standing at his side.

“No. We have our rifles, and so long as the bear meat holds out those cowardly brutes can think of nothing else. We will give them something to think about shortly, however. I think we have seen about enough of this, and I am a little anxious about the ponies, too.”

“Why?”

“You heard the wolves howling a little while ago. Well, you don’t hear them now, do you?”

“Meaning?” interjected Grace.

“That they may be attacking the ponies or they may be stalking us—may at this moment be within a few yards of us. I don’t worry about our safety. They would have to be very hungry to attack us, in force as we are, but let them overwhelm a pony and get him down, and he is lost.”

The guide paused, and peered through the leaves of a bunch of saplings behind which the party was standing. He gazed steadily for a full minute.

“Mrs. Gray, fix your gaze on that tree with the umbrella top. Do you get it?” asked White eagerly.

“Yes.”

“Let me know if you see anything.”

“I see something dark on one of the projecting limbs,” answered Grace, after a long look. “What is it?”

“An animal, probably a lion.”

“Ours?” questioned Hippy.

The guide shook his head.

“‘Ours’ as you call him is too full of bear meat at this moment to climb a tree. He is probably still munching under a thick growth of creeping juniper somewhere, and may remain there all night. That animal in the umbrella tree must be another lion. Want to try your marksmanship on him, Mrs. Gray? Take a shot at him,” urged Hamilton White. “This isn’t a fair test, I know, for you can’t even see your rifle sights.”

“Why, yes, I’ll try it.” The members of the party, at the guide’s direction, had brought along their rifles, as Ham knew that the weapons might be needed. Grace stepped forward a little, moved to the right, then to the left, each time peering over the barrel of her automatic rifle. “I am not certain, but I think I can line up one sight. Shall I fire?”

“Sure!” answered White.

The Overland girl knelt down and rested the rifle against the side of a tree, but the position did not suit her, so she lay flat on her back on the ground, with the weapon held between her elevated knees. It was for only a few seconds that she waited, then there came a flash and a sharp report, followed by a *spat!*

A snarl, and a faint squeal, came down to them.

“You hit the tree, and I shouldn’t be surprised if you barked the beast, too!” cried Ham enthusiastically. “Try it again.”

“No. Give the others a chance. The one who brings down the beast shall be free from all camp duties until Monday night,” suggested Grace.

“Here! Let me take a shot!” exclaimed Stacy. He raised his rifle, without changing his position at all, and before the girls could ask an opportunity to shoot, Stacy fired three quick shots.

A scream from the cat followed the shots. There was a lively scrambling in the umbrella tree, and the dark object that Hamilton White had pointed out disappeared for a few seconds. The party was too eager to see the result of the shots to take their eyes from the tree for even a second.

“There he comes!” cried Ham. “It’s a hit. Look at him tumble!”

The lion had plunged from the tree and was hurtling down. He struck the ground with a loud whack, landing a few yards from the campfire, where he lay kicking, then straightened out dead.

From the shots and the fall of the lion the

coyotes got a fright that sent them scurrying to the shadows.

“Now’s our chance to clear them out! Everybody shoot and shoot fast. No danger of doing any damage, for our ponies are behind us!” ordered White.

“Put down a barrage, you shooters, and give them a kick that will keep them going. I want to go to bed,” cried Stacy. “I never shoot at anything I can’t see. It isn’t sportsmanlike.”

Some lively shooting followed, and the camp and its immediate vicinity was cleared of the vicious visitors in a few moments.

“We must get the ponies up in a hurry now, Lieutenant,” reminded Ham. “You ladies stay out in the open, but keep together with rifles at ready. Brown, you stay here and look after them. Shoot if anything develops.”

The two men started back into the forest at a run, and they were just in time, for slinking forms were already stalking the plunging, snorting ponies.

It took but a few moments to free the ponies and lash them together with lead ropes, whereupon the men started back to camp. They hesitated to fire at the beasts, either coyotes or wolves, which were now stalking the ponies, fearing to alarm the girls. Only a slight rustling indicated the presence of the slinking

beasts, and that sound continued until the men with the ponies were more than half the way to the camp.

“Hark!” exclaimed the guide suddenly.

“Did you hear that, Lieutenant?”

“No. What was it?”

“Three shots. They weren’t from our camp, either—they were farther away—and I should say from a revolver. Let us hurry on.”

A rifle crashed.

“That one was from our party. I’m going to cut loose. You bring the horses in as best you can.” White cast off the lead rope, and dashed ahead towards the camp, keeping his mount from burying its nose in the ground by sheer muscular effort, as the little animal frequently stumbled, and staggered over obstructions that could not be seen in the darkness. The guide rode into camp at a swift gallop.

“What is it?” he demanded, sweeping the camp with a quick comprehensive glance.

“There isn’t anything the matter,” answered Stacy Brown, who stood leaning on his rifle.

“Then why did you shoot? I told you to shoot if anything developed,” rebuked the guide.

“I didn’t say that I did shoot. However, for your own private ear, not for general publi-

cation, I'll say I did fire a shot. What about it?" demanded the fat boy belligerently.

"Why?"

"Because some fellow was signalling us with small arms. Maybe some poor fellow is lost. I have a big heart, sir—I am full to overflowing with human sympathy, so I answered his shot."

Hamilton White sighed. There was no answer that he could think of. Grace laughed at him, and the guide grinned appreciatively.

Hippy arrived safely at camp with the horses a few moments later, and was quickly informed of the cause of the shooting. Neither Hippy nor White liked the thought of revealing their presence, for they knew that peril might lurk in the big woods for the Overland Riders, and for that reason they regretted Stacy's shot.

"Well, I reckon you ladies had better turn in. We three men must clean up the camp after the mussing it has had. How's the cat?" asked the guide.

"He is a nice fat fellow, Hamilton," bubbled Emma.

"And Stacy made a wonderful shot, didn't he, Mr. White?" spoke up Elfreda enthusiastically.

"I always make wonderful shots," boasted the fat boy. "Why, I could tell you of shots

that I have made that you wouldn't believe possible were anyone else to tell you the same story about himself."

The Overlanders laughed heartily.

"Chance shot!" declared Hippy.

"I think so, too," chirped Emma.

"I think I know a chance shot when I see one," added Lieutenant Wingate.

"I don't doubt it. You've made enough of them," growled Stacy, and the laugh was on Hippy. "I'm going to turn in. If the coyotes return don't bother to awaken me. I am perfectly able to take care of myself if they get close enough."

"You will help us clear up this camp, Stacy Brown!" ordered Hippy. Stacy demurred, but obeyed. When Hippy assumed that tone, Stacy knew that it was best to obey orders.

The three had been at work for only a few moments when a fusillade of shots was heard. The shots were from small arms, and were much nearer the camp than before. All work ceased instantly, and the guide looked his displeasure at the interruption. He beckoned to the girls to go to the far side of the camp, which they did without protest, but he observed that they had picked up their rifles and laid them across their laps, as they sat down in the shadows.

“Oh, Hamilton, do be careful,” called Emma.

Nora snickered, and Emma Dean elevated her chin disdainfully.

“Sh-h-h-h!” warned Grace. “I hear someone coming.”

“Help!” The cry was heard by the camp.

Ham White and Hippy, standing back from the light of the campfire, did not move. Their rifles were held in the crooks of their left arms ready for instant use.

“It may be a trick. Stand by!” warned White in a low voice.

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered Hippy.

A man, dishevelled, his clothing torn, his face bloody, staggered into the camp.

“I’m done for!” he gasped, and collapsed in a heap.

CHAPTER XV

A RUDE AWAKENING

“**L**OOK out!” was White’s warning to Lieutenant Wingate, as the guide sprang forward to the man on the ground.

“Is he dead?” called Elfreda, getting up to go forward to the visitor’s assistance.

“No. Stay where you are for the present, please.” The camp was silent for a moment, then White stood up. “It’s Jim Haley!” he announced. “And he has been pretty roughly used.”

“The Man from Seattle!” cried the girls. Elfreda was at his side instantly.

“Is he wounded?” she asked.

“I think not,” replied the guide.

“See if he has any peanuts with him,” advised Stacy Brown.

“Stacy!” Hippy’s voice was stern, and the fat boy subsided.

A quick examination by White and Miss Briggs failed to reveal any wounds. They brought water, and Elfreda bathed Haley’s

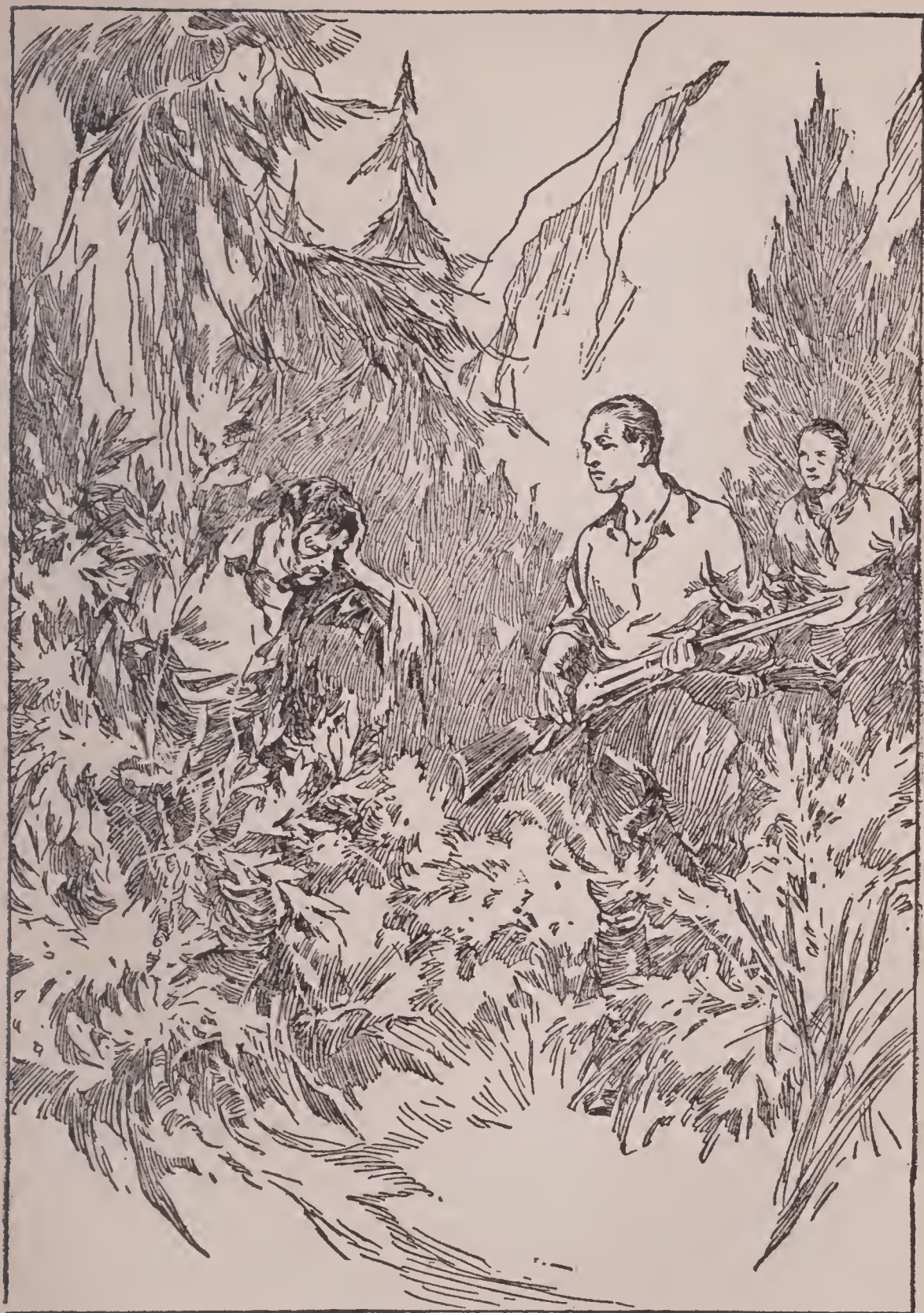
face, which, though bloody, was only scratched, probably by contact with bushes. It took but a short time to revive him, his trouble being almost wholly exhaustion. Grace hastened to make a pot of tea, which Haley gulped down and instantly recovered himself.

“Sorry I lost my samples, or I’d not have been in this shape,” he said, grinning.

“What happened to you?” Hippy asked.

“Same old story. The mountain ruffians wanted peanuts, so they tackled me. One taste of the International’s product and men will commit murder to get more of it. I threw away all I had, and they’re picking them up along the trail. It was the only way I could get rid of the scoundrels. Then I got into more trouble. A pack of wolves got the scent of the peanuts and they tackled me, too, but I hadn’t any of the International’s product to throw to them, so I had to run for it. They chased me nearly all the way in. ‘Good for man and beast’ is the slogan that I shall send on to the International for use in their publicity matter.”

The girls were now laughing heartily, but, as they recalled the manner of Haley’s leaving them, they subsided abruptly. Haley’s now merry eyes caught the significance of the change.



“I’m Done For!”

“What have I said or done now? Is it because I have no peanuts for you good people?”

“I think the young ladies would like an explanation of your sudden departure the other night,” spoke up Hippy Wingate.

“Were I to tell you that I ran away because I was afraid, you probably would not believe me, so I’ll not tell you that. There are some things one can speak of freely, and others that he cannot. This latter happens to be my difficulty now. If you feel that you do not want me, of course I shall not impose upon you. I thank you, but I warn you that you are not to enjoy any of the International’s product until you reach home. They eat ’em alive up here.”

“You are quite welcome to remain as long as you wish. Please stay over Sunday with us, Mr. Haley,” requested Grace. “We hope to have a spread for our Sunday dinner,” she added laughingly.

“You win, Mrs. Gray. Unfortunately, my International raiment is in a sad condition, but if you will lend me a pair of shears I’ll cut off the ragged ends and try to make myself presentable.”

The girls, at this juncture, bade the men good-night and turned in, for there were not

many hours left for sleep, and they were now very tired after the exciting night through which they had passed.

A few words passed between the guide and the peanut man, and Ham White listened with a heavy frown on his face.

“I won’t do it!” he exclaimed. “Do you think you would were you in my position?”

“If the International’s product didn’t pay me I should,” answered the peanut man, with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, hang the International!” retorted White. “I give you fair warning that I’ll not double-cross these young women for you or for any of your confounded outfit. I’ve done enough already, and I am thinking of going to them and making a clean breast of what I have done and then get out.”

“Don’t be a fool, White. Here! Read this.” Haley extended a folded slip of paper to the guide, who opened and read it, the frown deepening on his forehead.

White handed back the slip of paper, and resting his chin in the palm of his hand sat regarding the distant campfire thoughtfully, for they had withdrawn out of earshot of the camp for their conversation.

“Very well!” agreed Hamilton White after a few moments’ reflection. “I might as well

be hanged for a sheep as a wolf, but if anything happens here as a result I shall tell why. Remember that, Haley."

"Oh, well, what's a bag of peanuts more or less?" was the enigmatic reply of the Man from Seattle. "I'll take a nip of sleep, if you don't mind, and be on my way, but not *far* away."

The queer visitor took the blanket that had been given to him, and, walking back into the forest a short distance from the camp, lay down and went to sleep. The guide did not turn in at all, but sat silently in the shadows, rifle at his side, thinking and listening. Thus the rest of the night passed, and day began to dawn.

With the breaking of the day Hamilton White climbed the miniature mountain, and drawing a single-barreled glass from his pocket began studying the landscape. A tiny spiral of smoke about two miles to the north claimed his instant attention. He studied it for a few moments. At first the smoke was quite dark, then the spiral grew thin and gray as it waved lazily on the still morning air.

"Someone is building a breakfast fire," he muttered. "And they know how to build a fire, too. That may be Haley's crowd. Ah!"

As White slowly swept his glass around he discovered something else that aroused his

keen interest. On a distant mountain a flag was being wigwagged. He could not see the operator of it, but he was able to follow the message that was being spelled out.

Another shift of his glass and a careful study of known localities enabled the guide to find the person who was receiving the message, and soon the receiver began answering with his signal flag.

Ham White grinned as he read both messages.

“The forest eyes of Uncle Sam!” he murmured. The signalers were forest lookouts whose eyes were constantly on the alert watching over the vast forest within their range for suspicious smokes, and they were having a friendly Sunday morning conversation over a distance of nearly four miles.

Ham read and smiled.

“If they knew they would be more careful of what they said,” he chuckled, then a few moments later he climbed down, returned to camp and started the breakfast fire. He fried some strips of bacon, put on the coffee, and then he sounded the breakfast call.

“Come and get it!” was the call that rang out on the mountain air.

The Overlanders thought they wanted to sleep, in fact, they were hardly awake when

they got up grumbling, in most instances, and began hurriedly dressing. All were shivering, for the air was very chill. The odor of the breakfast, when they smelled it, added to the haste of their dressing.

“Stick your heads in the cold water and you will be all right,” advised the guide.

The girls returned from the spring, their faces rich with color, eyes sparkling, and ready for breakfast.

“How are the appetites? I don’t ask you, Mr. Brown. You have proved to my satisfaction that you can eat whether you are hungry or not,” laughed White.

“We are ready for breakfast, sir,” answered Elfreda Briggs. “My, but it does smell good.”

“Where is Mr. Haley?” questioned Grace, regarding the guide with a look of inquiry in her eyes.

“He thought best to sleep outside of the camp, and no doubt has gone on before this.”

“Why, Mr. White?” persisted Grace.

“That is a question that I can’t answer just now, Mrs. Gray,” returned the guide, meeting her eyes in a level gaze.

“Oh, very well. We will have breakfast.”

“We will,” agreed Stacy, and began to help himself from the frying pan, when the guide smilingly placed a hand on the fat boy’s arm.

"You forget the ladies, Mr. Brown," he reminded.

"Forget them? How could I?"

"It is you who forget, Hamilton," interposed Emma. "You forget that Stacy Brown never was brought up."

"Give me the chuck!" whispered Stacy. "Heap the plate."

White, catching the significance of the request, heaped the plate, and Stacy bore it to Emma with great dignity. He bowed low and offered the plate.

"Your highness is served," he said. "If you will be so kind as to call your sweet soul to earth from the ethereal realms above long enough to feed that sweet soul on a few fat slices of common pig, you will be a real human being. I thank you," added the boy, as Emma, her face flushing, took the plate, her lips framing a reply which was never uttered. The shout of laughter that greeted Stacy's act and words left Emma without speech. Nor did she speak more than once during the meal, then only to ask for another cup of coffee.

Breakfast finished and the morning work done in camp, the three men went out to groom the horses, while Grace and Elfreda strayed away. Their objective was the rock from which Ham White had made his early observation.

“Have you the diary?” asked Grace as they seated themselves. “Oh, what a wonderful view. Isn’t it superb?”

“Yes, I have the diary, and I see the view, and agree with you that it is superb, but suppose we get down to business before we are interrupted. I do not believe we shall be spied on here, at least,” said Elfreda, glancing about her.

The thumb-worn book was produced, and the girls bent over it, beginning with the first page. There were daily weather comments, movements of the prospector from place to place, little incidents in his daily life, none of which seemed to shed any light on the subject in which the two girls were interested.

“Here is something!” breathed Grace finally, and read, under date of April 30, the following paragraph:

“ ‘Plenty here. Dare not dig, for am watched. Picked up in channel enough pay-dirt to keep over next winter. Channel itself ought to pan out fortune, but shall have to have help. Isn’t safe to try it alone. The gang of cut-throats would murder me. Some day mebbey they’ll get me as it is.’ ”

“Hm-m-m-m,” murmured Miss Briggs. “I wondered why, if he had made such a find, Mr. Petersen shouldn’t get out the gold and

put it in a safe place before someone got ahead of him. The diary seems to furnish a reason for his delay. He must refer to the Murray gang."

"Listen to this entry, Elfreda," begged Grace, reading:

" 'Queer thing this morning. The sun was shining on the children, and on grandma's bonnet, but her face was as black as a nigger's. I wonder if that was a warning to me to keep away. Gold, gold! How terrible is the lure for the yellow stuff. It gets into the blood, it eats into the heart. It's a frightful disease.' "

"That checks up with what Mr. Petersen had me to write down, doesn't it, Grace?" breathed Elfreda.

"Undoubtedly. He must refer to the same thing, but it doesn't give us the least idea where the place is."

"The man would be a fool to write a thing like that in a diary—to tell where and how. Anything else? There is something on the next page."

"Yes," answered Grace, turning the page and reading:

" 'Though I haven't found it, I know pretty well where the mother lode is, but I'm afraid of it—afraid to look for it. I'm afraid the

wealth I should find there would kill me just because of the responsibility of possessing it. Then again, what is there left in life after a man has got all he has dreamed of, and yearned for, and fought for, and worked for, up to that time? Nothing!" "

"What a philosopher!" marvelled Grace Harlowe.

"He is right, too," agreed Miss Briggs. "Suppose we forget about it, also," urged Elfreda. "I am tired of it."

"J. Elfreda, if I didn't know you so well, I should believe you are in love, you are so gloomy. Listen! Mr. Petersen probably has no one surviving him. He wished you to have what he had found. It was the request of a man about to pass out; it was a trust, Elfreda. One day someone, perhaps the very ones who tried to kill him, will stumble on the Lost Mine. I should say that the prospector's request imposed a duty on you, my dear—a duty to go to the place he names, take possession of what you may find there and keep it for your own. You can't expect to make a fortune practicing law, especially if you don't do more practicing than you have done in the last few years. I fear these summer outings of ours have cost each of us something."

Elfreda said she didn't regret the loss of

time. Her time was her own, and she had sufficient funds to enable her to take care of herself and the little daughter that she had adopted a few years before.

“The question is, though, how am I going to find this place—how are we going to find it, I mean, for what I find is for the outfit, not for my own selfish self. I—”

Elfreda's eyes had been wandering over the scene that lay before them as Grace slowly turned the leaves of the diary. Miss Briggs thought she had seen a movement off to the right at the edge of the rock farthest from the camp.

“What is it?” demanded Grace, glancing up quickly.

“Nothing. Go on. Find anything else?”

“Only this: ‘When the sun is at the meridian the sands turn to golden yellow,’ ” read Grace.

“What does he mean, do you think?”

“I suppose he means to convey that the bed of the dry stream, if it is dry, shows a sort of golden strip. That is all I can make of it. There seems to be nothing else in the book in reference to the subject in which we are particularly interested. I am certain that the poor man knew what he was saying; I believe that he believed he had found what he says he found. Whether he did find it or not is quite

another matter. In any event Lost River and the lost mine are well worth looking for as we go along. If there be such a place, Overland luck will lead us to it," finished Grace.

"I doubt it—I was going to say I hope Overland luck doesn't lead us to it, to *our* River of Doubt. Oh, Grace!"

"Wha—at is it?"

"Oh, look!"

A black head of hair, lifted just above the level of the rock on the far side, revealed a low forehead and a pair of burning black eyes—evil eyes they seemed to the two startled girls. They could not see the hands that were gripping the edge of the rock, but what they could see was sufficient to fill them with alarm.

Without an instant's hesitation, Elfreda Briggs snatched up a chunk of flinty rock and hurled it with all her might. The chunk of rock fell a couple of yards short of the mark, bounced up into the air, and landed fairly on the man's head.

"Who says a woman can't throw a stone!" cried J. Elfreda Briggs almost hysterically.

CHAPTER XVI

BANDITS TAKE THEIR TOLL

“**R**UN!” cried Grace.

“The diary!” exclaimed Elfreda, as Grace dropped the book, snatched it up, and ran clambering down the rocks.

The guide saw them coming, saw that something was wrong, and strode forward to meet the two girls.

“What is it?” he asked sharply.

“A prowler,” answered Grace, out of breath.

“Where?”

“There! On the other side of the rock. He was spying on us, and I think Miss Briggs hit him with a piece of rock,” exclaimed Grace.

“Lieutenant!” called Hamilton White, and sprinted around the base of the big rock. Hippy Wingate was not far behind him, though Hippy did not know what had occurred, nor did he wait for an explanation. He knew that there was trouble, and that was sufficient for him.

The two men reached their objective at about the same time. White was peering at the rocks and bushes at the base of the big rock.

“Miss Briggs did hit him. See the blood there, and the bushes crushed where he fell. She must have given him a good wallop,” he chuckled.

White began to run the trail, a trail that was plain and easily followed. Hippy was right behind him, using his eyes to good advantage.

“Lieutenant, I think you had best go back and watch the camp. This may be a trick to coax us men away. Keep a sharp lookout. Have Brown stand guard with you. There is little need to worry, for we can see and hear. Skip!” urged the guide.

Hippy lost no time in getting back to camp, and when he reached there he found Grace and Elfreda laughing, and explaining to their companions what had happened.

They repeated the story to him.

“Oh, well, let them fuss. They can’t do anything to us,” averred Lieutenant Wingate after he had heard all of the story. “I’ll sit on top of the rock and watch over you children.”

“That’s what I say,” agreed Stacy. “We men can beat them at their own game, and have a lap or so to spare. Ham will chase them so far away that they never will find their way back. If he doesn’t I will.”

“Don’t be too positive,” admonished Grace. “I think it wise for us to be on the alert. For

some reason those ruffians are determined to be rid of us, at least.”

“Oh, I hope Hamilton will take care of himself,” murmured Emma, whereat her companions laughed heartily.

None of the girls left the immediate camp all that morning; they even sent Stacy to the spring for water, much to that young man’s disgust, for Stacy had planned on having a fine day’s sleep in his tent.

Noon came, and the guide had not returned, so Grace decided that they would have something to eat. The girls got the meal.

After they sat down to eat, the girls tried to be merry, but they admitted that they missed Hamilton White, though none felt alarm at his absence. The meal finished, dishes were washed and put away, and packs laid out for a quick move, in the event of that becoming necessary, for by this time the Overland Riders had learned to be ready at a moment’s notice.

Hippy from his point of vantage kept guard over the camp and its vicinity, now and then studying the view spread out before him. The air was fragrant with the odor of the forest, and Hippy grew sleepy. To keep awake he decided to get down and walk. This he did, reaching the ground on the side of the rock farthest from the camp.

The Overlander, with only a revolver, strolled through the forest making a circle around the camp, and studying the trees for blazes and the ground for indications of recent visitors. Now and then he would sit down, back against a tree, and gaze up into the blue sky and the waving tops of the big pines.

The afternoon wore away and Hippy was still trail-hunting. It was near supper time when Nora called him. There was no answer, so she climbed the rock, expecting to find her husband sleeping, for Hippy loved sleep fully as much as Stacy Brown did.

Lieutenant Wingate was not on the rock, but Nora found his rifle laying there. She ran back to her companions in alarm.

"Hippy isn't there!" she cried. "Oh, girls, can anything have happened to him?" Nora was on the verge of tears.

"No, of course not," comforted Grace.

"Then where is he?"

"Probably asleep somewhere about," suggested Emma. "You know he and Stacy have the sleep habit."

"I don't believe it. I am going out to search for him."

"Nora, you will not!" differed Grace with emphasis. "We will all remain where we are. To get separated would be foolish. Hippy is

all right, so sit down and chat with us. Mr. White will be along soon, and some others besides Emma Dean will be glad to see him," she added, with a teasing glance at Emma.

The Overland girls ate a cold supper that night, no one feeling like cooking or sitting down to a hearty meal. Nora was so worried that she refused to eat at all, and, while the other girls were equally disturbed, they masked their real feelings by teasing each other. Emma and Stacy were ragged unmercifully.

Darkness settled over the forest, but still no Hippy, no guide.

"I think it will be advisable to bring in the horses, don't you, Elfreda?" asked Grace.

Miss Briggs and the others thought that would be a wise move, so the ponies, and such of their equipment as was outside the camp, were brought in; fuel was gathered and piled up so that they might keep the fire burning; then the party sat down in their tents, with blankets thrown over their shoulders, and began their watch.

It was ten o'clock that night when the hail of Ham White was heard, and after the tension of the last few hours the Overland girls felt like screaming a welcome. Instead they sprang out and stood awaiting him.

"Well, did you good people think I had

deserted you?" he cried out. "I am nearly famished. Is there anything left from dinner?"

"Yes, of course there is. I will get you something. First I must tell you. Mr. Wingate has been missing since some time this afternoon. We don't know what to make of it unless he has fallen asleep somewhere," said Grace.

"What! Tell me about it."

Nora told the guide the story, explaining that Hippy had taken up his station on the rock to guard the camp, and that that was the last they saw of him.

Ham White was disturbed, but he did not show it. Instead he laughed.

"No doubt, as Mrs. Gray has suggested, he has gone to sleep. Where is Mr. Brown?"

"He is asleep in his tent, as usual," spoke up Emma. "Oh, Hamilton, won't you please find Hippy—now?"

"I will do my best. Give me a snack and I'll go out now. I followed the other trail for something like five miles. There were four men in the party, only one of whom came near the camp. The trail finally bumped into the side of a mountain and I lost it. It was so dark I could not follow it farther. Thank you!" he added, as Emma handed him some bacon. "I will go right out."

They followed him around the rock and watched with keen interest as Ham White searched for and found the trail of the missing Hippy, which he followed, with the aid of his pocket lamp, for some distance.

"He was strolling," announced the guide. "You can see here where he sat down to rest, then went on. Please return to camp. Unless he wandered off and lost his way, I shall probably soon find him."

The girls promptly turned back towards camp, Nora with reluctance, which she made no effort to conceal. Then followed two hours of anxiety. The guide returned shortly after midnight.

"There is no use of searching farther to-night," he announced. "Mr. Wingate undoubtedly has strayed away, but I'll find him in the morning. Please turn in and get some rest, for we shall undoubtedly have an active day to-morrow. In any event, don't lose your nerve, Mrs. Wingate. The Lieutenant has had enough experience to know how to take care of himself."

Nora went to her tent weeping, Emma Dean's arm around her, but Grace held back at a gesture from Elfreda, who had observed that the guide studiously avoided looking directly at Nora Wingate.

“Mr. White, have you anything to say to us?” questioned Elfreda.

“Meaning what?”

“We wish to know what you really did discover. It was well not to say any more than you did to Mrs. Wingate.”

“You made a discovery of some sort—of that we are convinced,” spoke up Grace.

“Yes, I did,” admitted White. “I found the lieutenant’s revolver beside a tree where he had been sitting. His trail ended there!”

“Meaning?” persisted Miss Briggs.

“That he was attacked and carried away, in all probability. I found evidences of that.”

“What can be done?” demanded Elfreda.

“Nothing until morning. I have means of obtaining assistance, which I will employ as soon as it is light enough to see.”

The girls turned away and walked slowly to their tent, and the guide stepped over to the tent occupied by Hippy and Stacy Brown. He was out in a moment and striding towards Elfreda’s quarters.

“Miss Briggs! Mrs. Gray!” he called.

“Yes!” answered the voices of Elfreda and Grace.

“Stacy Brown is not in his tent. There has been a struggle, and the boy has been forcibly removed,” was the startling announcement.

CHAPTER XVII

A TEST OF COURAGE

“S TA—STACY gone?” exclaimed Elfreda Briggs. “It can’t be possible. He is playing one of his practical jokes on us.”

“Let us look, but don’t disturb Emma and Nora if it can be avoided,” urged Grace.

The two girls, with the guide, repaired to Lieutenant Wingate’s tent, and examined it, using their pocket lamps. It was as Hamilton White had said—there was every evidence that a struggle had taken place there. The fat boy’s hat and his revolver lay where they had been hurled to one side of the tent. His blouse was a yard or so to the rear, and the imprint of his heels where they had been dragged over the ground was plainly visible.

“He must have been asleep,” nodded White.

“Yes,” agreed Grace. “If awake Stacy would have set up such a howl that none could have failed to hear. When do you think this was done, Mr. White?”

“When we were out looking for the lieu-

tenant. If you will remember, Mr. Brown remained behind."

"Do you think it wise to follow his trail?" asked Grace.

"No. Not now. I dare not leave the camp. All this may be part of a plan. My duty is here, at least until daylight, when I will get into communication with those who will find both men."

"You think so, Mr. White?" questioned Elfreda anxiously.

"Yes. It is the work of the same gang, but what their motive is we can only surmise. You and Mrs. Gray may know."

Elfreda felt her face growing hot, and a retort was on her lips, but she suppressed it.

"Mrs. Gray, if you think I should try to run the trail now, I will do so, but it would be against my judgment. I hope you do not insist," said White, turning to Grace.

"I believe you are right," answered Grace. "Come, Elfreda, we will go to our tent, for no serious harm can come either to Hippy or Stacy. They dare not harm them."

Ham White did not reply. He knew the character of the men who committed that piece of banditry, and knew that they would hesitate at no crime to gain their ends, whatever those ends might be.

The guide got no sleep that night. Mindful of the attacks that had been made on the camp, he took up his position at a distance, and, with rifle in hand, sat motionless the rest of the night. From his position in the deep shadows he commanded a view of the entire camp, which was dimly lighted by the campfire all night long.

There were occasional sounds that Ham White did not believe were made by marauding animals, but none were definite enough to warrant exposing his position. During his vigil nothing occurred to disturb the sleepers.

The graying mists of the early morning were rising from gulch and forest, enfolding the mountaintops, when Ham White stole around the camp, scrutinizing every foot of the ground. By the time he had completed this task the mists were so far cleared away that a good view of the surrounding country might be had.

From his kit the guide selected a wigwag signalling flag, and taking one of the tent poles for use as a flagstaff, he went cautiously to the high rock that stood sentinel over the Overland camp, and climbed to its top.

"I hope none of the girls wake up," he muttered, peering down into the camp, which was as quiet as a deserted forest.

Ham White, after attaching the flag to the

pole, began waving it up and down, which in the wigwag code means, "I wish to speak with you."

It was at this juncture that Grace Harlowe slowly opened her eyes. Where she lay she could look straight up to the top of the rock without making the slightest movement, and her amazement must have been reflected in her eyes.

Like several of the Overland girls, Grace's experience in the war had included learning to signal and to read signals. She was out of practice, but was easily able to read any message not sent too fast. Ham began his message, after getting the attention of the persons to whom he was signalling, at a speed that Grace could not follow. She did, however, catch a few words that were enlightening.

"Trouble—Haley—Trail—Send word—Caution—Great secrecy or expose hands—Fatal to—" were some of the words that she caught as the guide flashed them off. Then he paused.

"How I wish I could see the answer," muttered the Overland girl, as she watched Hamilton White, with glasses at his eyes, receiving the message that was being sent to him.

Grace Harlowe's, however, were not the only pair of eyes that witnessed that exhibition of signalling. Other eyes were observing, but

that other pair could not read a word of what the signallers were saying.

White dropped his glasses and snatched up his flag, and she read, this time with greater ease:

“It may be fatal. Great danger to both. My responsibility. Must have instant action. This an order. Obey without loss time. Report soon as anything to say.” The guide signed his name, and the words that followed the signature filled Grace Harlowe with amazement. She saw the guide remove the flag from its staff and hide it under a stone, after which he descended to the camp, passing the open tents without so much as a glance at them.

Ham stirred up the fire and put over the breakfast, and, while it was cooking, Grace came out, greeting him cheerfully.

—“Is there any news, Mr. White?” she asked sweetly.

“No, not yet.”

“What have you done?”

“I signalled to a fire-lookout station that assistance was needed. It is best to wait until we hear from them.”

“How, signal?” she questioned, appearing not to understand.

“By the air route, Mrs. Gray,” was the smiling reply.

Grace Harlowe shrugged her shoulders.

“You are a very clever man, Mr. White,” she said, and walked to her tent to awaken Miss Briggs.

When informed that Stacy Brown was missing, a few moments later, Nora Wingate became hysterical, but Grace and Elfreda calmed her, and the party were ready to sit down to breakfast when the guide announced it as ready.

It was a trying, anxious morning for the little band of Overlanders. White made frequent trips to the rock, observed questioningly by Elfreda.

“What is he looking for, Grace?” she asked. “Does the man expect to find the bandits that way?”

“I don’t know. Why not ask him, J. Elfreda?”

“Not I. You know I would not.”

About mid-forenoon Grace suggested to the guide that he go out into the forest and see if he could glean any information as to the direction that the kidnappers had taken when they left the camp, with either Hippy or Stacy Brown.

White pondered the subject a moment, then agreed.

“If you will promise not to leave camp, and to fire a shot at the least suspicious sound or occurrence, I will go out,” he said. “One

of you had better go to the rock and take station there until my return."

Grace said she would do that. Matters were working out to her satisfaction, and, after telling Elfreda to take her rifle and post herself a short distance to the rear of the camp, and assigning Emma and Nora to the right and left ends of their camping place, Grace climbed the rock and sat down. After Ham White, following a survey of the camp and her arrangements, of which he approved with a nod and a wave of the hand, had left the camp, Grace got up and looked for the signal flag, which she found under a flat stone.

"Now! Having disposed of my companions I shall see what I shall and can see," she told herself.

Securing the signal flag, the Overland girl took a survey of the landscape. A vast sea of dense forest lay all about her, broken here and there by a white-capped mountain. Nothing that looked as if it might be a fire-lookout station attracted her eyes. She had used her field glasses, but without result.

A moment of vigorous signalling on her part followed, after which Grace swept the landscape again. She discovered nothing at all. Another trial was made, and the word "answer" was spelled out by her.

Her eye caught a faint something far to the north of her, and Grace's glasses were at her eyes in a twinkling. A little white flag was fluttering up and down against the background of forest green in the far distance.

"I've got him!" cried the girl exultingly. I've got him!" Then, wigwagging, Grace Harlowe signalled the one word, "Report!"

"Who?" came the answer, almost before she could get the glasses to her eyes to read the message.

"For White," she wigwagged. "Report!"

Holding the flag, now lowered to the rock, with one hand, the other holding the glasses to her eyes, Grace bent every faculty to watching that little fluttering, bobbing square of white, that, at her distance from it, looked little larger than a postage stamp.

"Repeat!" she interrupted frequently, whenever part of a word was missed. It was a laborious effort for her, out of practice as she was, and the exchange of messages lasted for a full half hour before the Overland girl gave her unseen, unknown signaller the "O. K." signal.

Grace folded the flag and placed it under the stone, then straightened up.

"Mr. Hamilton White, I have you now!" she exclaimed, a triumphant note in her voice.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FLAMING ARROW

“**W**HERE am I at?”

It was Hippy Wingate's first conscious moment since he was struck down while sleeping with his back against a tree not far from the Overland camp. All was darkness about him as he awakened in unfamiliar surroundings. Essaying to rise, the Overlander discovered that he was bound. Still worse, there was a gag in his mouth.

A gentle breeze was blowing over him, and at first he thought he was still under the trees. Hippy then realized that there was a hard floor beneath him. His head ached, and when he tried to sit up he found that it swam dizzily.

“I wonder what happened to me?” he muttered. “Hello!”

There was no response to his call; in fact, his voice, still weak, did not carry far and it was thick because of the gag. Then began a struggle with himself, that, while it exhausted him for the time being, aided in overcoming his dizziness.

Hippy heard men conversing, heard them approaching, whereupon he pretended still to be unconscious. A door was flung wide open, and a lantern, held high, lighted up the interior of the building with a faint radiance.

“Hain’t woke up,” announced one of the two men who stood in the doorway.

“Mebby he never will,” answered the other.

“I don’t reckon it makes much difference, so long as we got two of ’em,” returned the first speaker. “What shall we do—let ’im sleep?”

“Yes.”

The man with the lantern strode over and peered down at the prostrate Overlander, while the prisoner, from beneath what seemed to be closed eyelids, got a good look into the swarthy, hard-lined face. Lieutenant Wingate would remember that face—he would remember the voices of both men—would know them wherever he heard them.

“Let ’im sleep. When he wakes up we’ll have something to say to ’im.” With that the two men went out, slamming the door behind them.

The lantern light had shown Hippy that he was in a log cabin. At his back was a window, or a window-opening, for which he was thankful, as it offered a possible way of escape. But

how, in his present condition, could he hope to gain his liberty?

There was no answer to the Overlander's mental question. First, he must regain his strength. The leather thongs with which he was bound interfered with his circulation, and his legs were numb. So were his arms, and his jaws ached from the gag that was between his teeth. In fact, Lieutenant Hippy Wingate did not remember ever to have suffered so many aches and pains at one time as he had at that moment.

He began his struggles again, but more with the idea of starting his circulation and gaining strength than with any immediate hope of escape. By rolling over several times he was able to reach the door, but having reached it he had no hands with which to open it. Hippy wanted to look out. Failing there, he be-thought himself of the window, and rolled back across the floor to it. Exerting a great effort, he managed to work his head up to the window so he could see out.

The night was dark, but the Overlander was able to make out trees and rugged rocky walls, together with what appeared to be a dense mass of bushes. The scene was unlike anything he had seen in the State of Washington since his party had started on their outing.

“I may be up in the Canadian Rockies, for all I know,” he muttered.

Hippy sank down, weak and trembling.

For a change, he rolled back and forth, pulling himself up to the window again and again, and each time found himself stronger than before.

“If I were free and had a gun I’d show those cowards something!” raged the Overlander, his anger rising. “Why did they have to pick on me? I wonder what the folks at the camp are think—”

“Sh-h-h-h!”

It was a low, sibilant hiss from the window, and Hippy fell suddenly silent.

“Keep quiet and listen to me,” warned a hoarse voice. “The gang is out of range, but we don’t know when one or more of ’em will be back. I’m coming in.”

Not being able to answer, except with a grunt, the Overlander merely grunted his understanding.

The stranger leaped into the room and felt for the prisoner.

“I am going to cut you loose. Are you wounded?”

“No, I think not,” mumbled Hippy, but his words were unintelligible.

The first thing the stranger did was to re-

move the gag, which he did with so much care that the operation gave no pain. Then came the leather thongs. These he ripped off with a few deft sweeps of a knife, and Lieutenant Wingate was a free man so far as his bonds were concerned.

“Can you walk?” in the same hoarse voice.

“I could fly if I had to,” was the brief reply.

“Who are you?”

“You wouldn’t know if I told you. Here!”

The man thrust a revolver into his hand.

“Don’t use it unless you have to. We aren’t out of the woods by a long shot. Come!”

The stranger assisted Hippy through the window, which was accomplished with some difficulty, for Lieutenant Wingate was stiff and sore. A firm hand was fixed on his arm, and his companion began leading him rapidly away. Not a word was spoken for several minutes—not until they had plunged into the dark depths of a canyon, through which the man picked the way unerringly.

“How are you standing it?” was the question abruptly put to Lieutenant Wingate.

“Rotten! But I’ll pick up speed as I go along and get my motors warmed up.”

The stranger chuckled.

“Where are we going?”

“We are headed for your camp, but it’s

quite a hike and a hard one. If you get leg-weary, stop and rest a bit. How'd they get you?"

"I went to sleep just outside the camp, and I think I must have got a clump on the head. Ouch!" Hippy had lifted a hand to his head, and felt there a bump as big as an egg. "I guess I did get a clump. It's a wonder I'm not dead. When is it, to-day or to-morrow?"

"It's the day after," was the half humorous reply.

"Please tell me how you found me?" asked the Overlander.

"Ham White got in touch with some people I know. They got word to me, and gave me the tip. The same people saw the gang that got you heading for the pass where you were taken, so I made for that place as soon as I got the word from White. I was lucky; I might have had to hunt the whole state over for you. The gang made a bad play when they picked you up. We've got a line on them now."

"Who is we?" interjected Hippy.

"All of us," was the non-committal reply. "Don't speak so loudly. It isn't safe yet."

That walk Hippy Wingate never forgot. Every step sent shooting pains through his head and legs. He stumbled frequently, but

every time the grip of the stranger tightened on his arm, and he was kept on his feet.

“When you get to camp, tell your people to watch out. Some of the gang are still out on trail. I reckon they aren’t out for any good, and they may be planning to rush your camp and get the rest of your party.”

“Why do they want us?” wondered Lieutenant Wingate. “Is it robbery?”

“Yes, but not the sort of robbery you think. Tell your friend Miss Briggs that it’s time she told her party her story. She knows why.”

“I begin to see a light,” muttered the Overlander. “Say! There’s something familiar about your voice, but I can’t place it. Got a cold?”

“Yes.”

Little conversation was indulged in after that, and at last Hippy’s rescuer halted and pointed.

“See that light?” he asked in a whisper.

“Yes.”

“That’s your camp. I leave you here. Take my advice, and don’t make much noise to-night. Keep your fire low, and post guards. Tell White there is a man out here wants to see him. You need not let the others know about my being here. I’m in a hurry. Good-night.”

“But—won’t you come—”

“Go on!”

Hippy wavered a little as he started towards the camp, into which he staggered a few minutes later.

A cry greeted his appearance, and Nora's arms were flung about his neck ere he had fairly reached the light of the campfire. He held up his hand for silence.

“Give me something to eat, if you love me. I'm famished.”

Nora ran for the coffee pot, which Ham White took from her. Hippy stepped over to him and whispered something to the guide, as he relieved White of the coffee pot.

White immediately left the camp.

By now the other members of the party were about Hippy showing their joy at his return.

“Have you seen Stacy?” demanded Grace eagerly, as soon as she could get his attention.

“No. Why?”

“He, too, has been missing, and—”

“The curs!” raged Lieutenant Wingate. “So they got him, too, did they?”

“Never mind now. You must drink and eat. Where is Mr. White?” wondered Grace, glancing quickly about the camp.

“I sent him out on an errand,” answered Hippy. “Ah! The coffee is not so hot that it burns, but it's nectar.”

“Oh, my darlin’! Your head!” cried Nora, just discovering the swelling there.

Elfreda was at his side in an instant, examining the lump that, to Hippy, seemed fully as big as his head itself. Miss Briggs ran to her tent for liniment, and in a moment was applying it to the sore spot.

Hippy’s story was brief, because there was little that he could tell them. He was amazed when he learned that he had been away so long.

Grace explained to him how White had reached some lookouts on the range and got them to go in search of him. “How they found you so soon, I don’t understand. Do you?”

Hippy shook his head.

“There are some things in this neck of the woods that are beyond explaining. I hope they didn’t give Stacy such a wallop as I got. But don’t worry about him. They can’t keep him long. Stacy will eat them out of his way. I was easy. He isn’t.”

Ham White returned at this juncture.

“We shall probably have another guest to-night, if all goes well,” he announced.

“A guest?” wondered the Overlanders.

“So I am informed; perhaps more than one. Do not ask any questions, for I can’t answer them. Well, Lieutenant, you had a rough time of it, didn’t you?”

“The Germans could not have done anything much worse.”

“Would you recognize any of the fellows who captured you?” questioned White.

“I saw only two, but I shall know them when I see them, and they will have reason to know me, for—”

“Hamilton, who are the guests you are expecting?” urged Emma in her sweetest tone of voice.

“Sorry, Miss Dean, but I can’t tell you.”

“Isn’t that just like a man—making a mystery of everything? I think—”

“Hello, folks!” cried a voice from the bush.

The Overlanders fairly jumped at the sound of the familiar voice.

“Tom! Tom Gray!” cried Grace, running and throwing herself into her husband’s arms. “How happy I am to see you, you will never know. I needed you, Tom—we all have needed you, and I think we shall need you still more. Where did you come from?”

“Hello, old chap!” cried Hippy jovially.

The Overlanders crowded around Captain Tom Gray joyously.

“How are you, White!” greeted Grace’s husband, as soon as he could free himself from the welcome of Grace, Nora and Emma. “I have been looking forward to meeting you, and

I knew, from what I had heard, just the sort of man you would be—I mean as to looks,” added Tom, grinning. “The men on the range are looking forward to seeing their—”

A warning look from the guide checked Tom.

“I will explain later,” whispered the guide.

“I thank you for sending for me,” bowed Tom, with ready resourcefulness. “I knew that the need must be urgent or you would not have done so.”

“Yes. I have a double responsibility—a moral and a physical one, and I felt that I had no right to go farther until I had consulted with Mrs. Gray’s husband. We are heading for trouble, in fact we have already been having it.”

“Tell me about it. I know some of the facts, but I want them at first hand.”

“Miss Briggs knows the story. I suggest that she relate the story of her experiences, which will give you the slant I want you to get. I suppose you know of the kidnapping of Lieutenant Wingate and Stacy Brown?” asked the guide.

“The bare facts only. J. Elfreda, you seem to be the pivotal point on this journey. Grace is holding my hand so tightly that I shall have to ask her to give me a chance to listen to you,” answered Tom laughingly.

Emma offered to demonstrate to give Tom a "chance" to hear the story. Grace laughed happily. A great load of responsibility and worry had been lifted from her shoulders.

"I will be good, J. Elfreda. Please tell Tom everything—everything, remember. Mr. White, we wish you to sit in," added Grace, as the guide discreetly moved away.

There followed a moment of silence, then Elfreda Briggs began the story of the fire, of her arrival at the forest cabin, and of the dramatic occurrences there. She told of the diary, of the loss of the gold dust, and of the general directions that Sam Petersen had left for locating the claim, though Elfreda did not say what those directions were. She thought it advisable not to do so.

Hippy got up and walked to his tent, returning shortly and standing with his back to a tree and his hands in his pockets as Miss Briggs finished her story.

Grace took up the story from that point, relating all that had occurred since Elfreda's experience in the forest shack, but avoiding what she had learned through her wigwagging about Hamilton White.

Tom Gray pondered over the story, stroking his cheek, which Tom always did when thinking deeply.

“The Murrays, eh, White?” he questioned, glancing up at the guide.

Ham White nodded.

“It looks that way,” replied White.

“They know about this Lost River story, do you think?”

“Most everyone does up here. It is an old Indian legend, and probably has no more foundation in fact than most Indian legends,” answered the guide. “Mind you, I am not saying that such a place doesn’t exist. No doubt there are many rich veins in the Cascade Range yet to be discovered. Petersen evidently believed he had found it, but he undoubtedly was delirious when he described the spot. He had been shot, you know.”

“When he made the entries in his diary he hadn’t been shot,” retorted Miss Briggs with some warmth. She checked herself sharply.

“Not having seen the entries I cannot say,” replied White.

“What puzzles me is what became of the contents of the bag of gold. Surely the bandit who came back did not take it, for he did not have the opportunity,” reminded Captain Gray. “What became of it, Elfreda?”

“Have a look at this,” spoke up Hippy Wingate, tossing a small leather pouch of his own into Elfreda’s lap.

“Wha—what—” gasped the girl.

“It is the gold you thought had been stolen, and—”

A peculiar whirring sound checked what Hippy was about to say. The Overlanders glanced up and saw descending upon them what they took to be a falling firebrand, with a streamer of light like the tail of a comet following it.

“Look out!” shouted Hippy.

His warning was not necessary, for the Overland Riders had leaped to their feet and ran for cover. The firebrand hit the ground with a thud, and as it landed Hamilton White threw a blanket on it, and himself on the blanket to smother the flame. The guide knew that there was a meaning in that flaming visitor’s arrival, and he wished to ascertain it.

“Oh, Hamilton, what is it?” cried Emma.

“The flaming arrow!” exclaimed Tom Gray. “That’s an Indian trick. No white man ever thought of that. What does it mean, White?”

“Wait!” The guide removed a thin piece of bark that had been bound to the arrow near its butt, and from under the bark he drew out a piece of paper. “It is a message,” he announced after peering at the piece of paper, and then handed it to Tom Gray.

CHAPTER XIX

HIS FATE IN THE BALANCE

"**I** T'S a red hot one, I'll bet!" exclaimed Hippy.

"Hippy!" admonished Nora.

"What is it, Tom?" begged Grace, slipping an arm through his. "I think I know."

"You are right, Hippy." Captain Gray held the slip of paper down so the feeble light of the fire shone upon it. "It is from Stacy. Listen:

" 'Help! I'm in Dutch again. Get me out, quick. They are a lot of ruf—of fine gentlemen here, but they want something that you've got. If they don't get it I'm to be shot at sunrise. Oh, wow! They want a book they say you have, and they want it bad. You are to leave it on top of the rock by the camp and go away. They want something else, too—a bag of gold that you or somebody took from that fellow Petersen. Mebby I'll see him soon. Do you folks know anything about the gold? I told them the nearest thing to gold that I'd seen up here was a sunset the other night.

They say the book and the gold doesn't belong to you—that one of our party stole it. You folks have been holding out on me! I'll be even with you for that. Can't write any more 'cause the mail man won't wait. Hurry, for the love of Mike! Hurry or I'm a dead one! Wow! Stacy.' "

"They wouldn't dare!" cried Nora.

"Oh, yes they would," answered Tom. "The Murrays are a desperate gang. Even if they get what they demand they might put him out of the way, but it is my opinion that they will simply set him adrift, in which event we shall find him. How do you communicate, White?" he asked, turning to the guide.

"He wigwags," spoke up Grace; whereat the guide gave her a quick glance, but the Overland girl's face told him nothing.

"Please take your flashlight and see if you can pick up a station with it, White. If so, tell them where the boy may possibly be and ask them to send someone after him."

"Just a moment, Captain. May I speak with you aside?"

Tom stepped away from his companions, and he and the guide held a long whispered conversation. Tom then returned to the others.

"Mr. White advises against doing as I suggested. He says the rangers are already look-



“The Flaming Arrow!”

ing for Stacy, and that to signal would simply be putting the bandits on their guard. There are other reasons which he has given me in confidence. You shall know all about it later on. Now may I see that diary, Miss Briggs?"

"Yes, of course. Throw it away if you like. I never want to see the hateful thing again. What I do think I am entitled to, though, is an explanation from you, Hippy Wingate. When, where and how did you get my bag of gold?"

"Perhaps a good little fairy, knowing my love for the yellow stuff, dropped it into my mess kit so that I might buy gold plates to use at meals in place of the luxurious tin plates that I am now using. How did you get it, J. Elfreda?"

"Mr. Petersen gave it to me. He said the Murrays knew he had it, and that it was to be mine for what he was pleased to call my kindness to him. He gave me the diary at the same time because it held a supposed clue to Lost Mine and Lost River, a river paved with gold."

"I don't wonder that Stacy accuses us of 'holding out on him,' " chuckled Tom Gray.

"I might, and with very good reason, make the same accusation against certain persons unmentionable," retorted Miss Briggs, which brought a laugh from her companions.

Tom Gray, in the meantime, had been run-

ning over the pages of the diary, noting every entry made by the old prospector.

“A leaf has been torn out of here. It looks as if it were lately torn out. Did you do it?” he asked, addressing Miss Briggs.

Grace explained that the leaf was torn out when the book was snatched from her hand one night, of which circumstance she had already told Tom.

“What was on it?”

“We destroyed the leaf,” spoke up Miss Briggs.

“That wasn’t what I asked you, J. Elfreda. Of course you do not have to answer if you don’t wish to. I am simply trying to get at the bottom of this affair as a guide to our immediate actions. It is very important.”

Elfreda glanced at Hamilton White. He caught the glance and, instantly comprehending, stepped back and began poking the fire and putting on fresh fuel.

“‘Grandma and the Children—three peaks due east,’ ” whispered Elfreda.

She saw a sudden flash in Tom Gray’s eyes, an expression that Elfreda was unable to interpret.

“‘When the sun is at the meridian the sands turn to golden yellow,’ ” he quoted from the diary. “This, taken in connection with what

you say was on the torn leaf, is quite enlightening. I think we will tear out two more pages while we are about it, if you have no objection."

"Go as far as you like, Tom. You may throw the book away if you wish. It has brought us only bad luck," said Miss Briggs.

"I say, White! My suggestion is that we leave this confounded diary where Stacy directs us to leave it."

"And the gold?"

"Well, that is different. I don't like the idea of giving gold to those cutthroats. What is the value of the stuff? Let us look it over."

Tom Gray examined the nuggets, weighed them in his hand, a stone at a time, and, disregarding the "dust," closed and secured the bag. Then he opened it, and weighing out several nuggets again in his hand, glanced over at Miss Briggs.

"I should say that there is something more than two thousand dollars' worth of nuggets and 'dirt' there, of which I hold from five to seven hundred dollars' worth in my hand. Elfreda, you probably will think I have a cold nerve to make the suggestion, but I propose that we put these nuggets in a bag with the diary and leave them for the bandits."

"What! Give five hundred dollars to a

bunch of bandits?" cried Hippy aghast. "Impossible! Are you crazy?"

"We may be, at that," admitted Captain Gray.

"Say yes. Tom knows what he is doing," whispered Grace, nudging Miss Briggs.

"Of course, Tom," replied Elfreda promptly. "If you say leave it all, I'll say the same. You can't imagine what a relief it will be to me to be rid of it."

"Thank you. White! A word with you!"

An earnest conversation followed between Tom Gray and the guide, following which, Ham White packed his kit, stowed some food in his bag and brought up his horse.

"Look here, old top! Where are you going?" demanded Hippy.

"On business, Lieutenant. The Captain can tell you why. I hope to see you soon. Good-night and good luck." With that the guide turned his horse toward the south, the opposite direction from that which the Overland Riders were following. They were amazed, and demanded an explanation.

"It isn't safe to say a word," answered Tom. "I'll tell you this much, though. Pack up and be ready to start on a long ride within an hour. We are heading towards home!"

CHAPTER XX

“I’M SHOT!” CRIES EMMA

“**H**OME!” cried Nora and Emma in chorus. “No, no, no!”

“Why go home?” wondered Miss Briggs. “I thought we had just started on our adventures.”

“Don’t oppose,” whispered Grace.

“So that’s the game, is it?” chuckled Hippy, who had been regarding Tom narrowly, and saw by the expression of Captain Gray’s face that he had a definite motive in making the announcement that they were about to head towards home.

“All right, Grace. He did not say that we are going home,” answered Miss Briggs in reply to Grace. “I might have known. To leave here now, with Stacy missing, and our affairs in the air, as it were, would be unthinkable. I am afraid my brain is becoming addled.”

“You should demonstrate,” reminded Emma, and Elfreda nodded her approval of the sentiment.

Preparations for the departure had already

been begun by Captain Gray, and now Hippy turned in to assist him. Tom soon left to get his horse, which had been tethered not far from camp. He had refused to answer questions as to how he found the camp, nor did Grace ask, but the others did.

When all was in readiness for leaving, packs lashed, horses saddled, Tom, taking the diary and the gold, went to the rock and hid the stuff as the message from Stacy had directed them to do.

“Mount!” ordered Tom upon his return from planting the book and the gold, and he doused the fire, making certain that every last spark was extinguished. He then swung into his saddle and led the way, heading south, followed silently by the others of the party. They wondered how, in the darkness, he could find his way, but Tom was taking the stars as his guides. He was too experienced a forester not to be able to go in any direction in a forest, day or night, and go almost unerringly.

The Overlanders were sleepy and not any too happy. They were worrying about Stacy, too. There was little conversation because it was necessary to give all attention to their riding. Riding in a forest at night is a trying experience, and sometimes a painful one when one considers the bumps, the collisions of legs

against trees, and the slaps in the face from low-hanging bushes. All this the Overland party experienced, so their progress was slow.

They had proceeded about an hour when a distant rifle report was heard. It seemed to come from the rear. Tom called a halt to listen. A rattling fire sprang up, and continued for several minutes; then died out after a few further scattering shots.

“Can you locate it, Tom?” called Hippy.

“I should say that the firing is somewhere near the camp we left,” replied Tom.

“Oh, how strange,” cried Emma. “Why are they fighting there, and who is it that is fighting?”

“Quite possibly it is the bandits fighting over J. Elfreda’s gold,” suggested Grace as the party, at a command from Tom Gray, moved forward again. Some time later the leader called back that they were about to come upon a small watercourse and that they would follow it.

“We shall probably find plenty of overhanging bushes, so protect your faces,” he directed.

They wondered how he knew that they were near a stream. Tom said he could smell it.

“Wonderful scent,” growled Hippy. “Perhaps you can tell us whether or not the water is wet.”

“It may be for you if you don’t watch your step,” answered Captain Gray laughingly.

They entered the stream a few moments after that, and the going proved to be even worse than Grace’s husband had predicted. Bushes hung over the stream and met, forming a bower so low that the riders had to lean well forward to protect their faces from being continuously whipped. Not alone that, but the horses were constantly slipping on moss-covered stones, threatening at every moment to unhorse their riders.

Emma wailed her protests ere they had proceeded far, but Tom said they must take their medicine and be good sports.

“I don’t want to be a sport,” complained Emma. “I want to sleep.”

“Demonstrate over it,” advised Lieutenant Wingate.

It was just before daylight when Tom headed out of the stream through a narrow defile in the rocks, finally coming to a halt on a level piece of ground of about three acres, surrounded on all sides by mountain forests.

The Overlanders could not see their surroundings clearly, but got a general idea of them, and immediately begged their leader to let them dismount for a rest and for a bite to eat.

“All right! Go to it,” cried Tom Gray, setting them the example by dismounting and removing the saddle from his horse.

As the day began to dawn, the girls gazed interestedly at the terraced forest, at the green carpet of mountain meadowland that lay at their feet through which flowed a sparkling stream of water, then up at the dawning day. It was then that Grace made a discovery.

“Why, Tom, we have been traveling north, not south!” she exclaimed.

“Too true, Loyalheart,” answered Captain Gray with a jolly note in his voice.

“Then we are not on our way home?” cried Nora.

“No. We are going on into the Cascades, in the foothills of which we now are. We are going to find Stacy, and then—perhaps we shall find something else. First, folks, we shall have to meet and reckon with the bandits of the range. They are determined that we shall not make a move that they do not check.”

“Do—do you think they are watching us now, Tom?” begged Emma with concern.

“Possibly, but I rather think they are fully occupied at present. I will let you into a secret. The purpose of leaving Elfreda’s gold and the old prospector’s diary was to trap the bandits and attack them.”

“Who will attack them?” Elfreda asked.

“Certain officers of the law who were lying in wait about the camp even before you left there. It was a battle on our campground that you heard—a battle between the officers and the bandits of the range. We will now get breakfast and have forty winks of sleep, provided we are not interrupted.”

Sleep was welcome, even more so than breakfast. The meal was quickly disposed of and the Overlanders lay down with their clothes on, Tom advising them to be ready to move at an instant's notice.

They had not been asleep long ere the crash of a rifle brought all members of the party to their feet.

“Lie down and stay down!” commanded Captain Gray, setting the example by throwing himself to the ground. Tom knew what the others did not—that a rifle bullet had sped low over the spot occupied by the Overlanders.

Then came a heavy scattering fire from two sides of the mountain meadow, and now they could plainly hear the bullets singing overhead.

Frightened, Emma Dean sprang up to run to the cover of the trees and as she ran they saw her throw up her hands.

“I'm hit! Oh, I'm shot!” she cried, and pitched forward in the deep meadow grass.

CHAPTER XXI

STACY SEEKS A CHANGE

WHEN Stacy Brown awakened from the sleep into which his captors had put him, he was lying across the back of a horse.

At first the fat boy didn't know what had occurred; then he recalled that there had been a struggle in his tent and that a hand on his throat had nearly choked him to death. A few seconds after that he lost consciousness. And now he was being carried away on horseback.

"Let me up! Let me up!" he shouted.

A prod from a heavy boot caused him to utter a loud howl.

"Shut up!" commanded the man behind him in the saddle on the same horse.

"Le—let me up and I will. I'll yell all the way if you don't," persisted Stacy.

The boy's hands were bound to his sides, and his ankles were tied together.

For reasons of his own, the rider halted the horse and dismounted. He then released the boy's ankles, and slightly loosened the leather

thongs that bound his arms, but there he stopped.

“Aren’t you going to untie me?” demanded Stacy.

“Hold your tongue. You’ll be lucky if I don’t clout you over the head. You hang onto me now. If you try any tricks I’ll finish you with a bullet between the eyes.”

“Oh, wow!” wailed the fat boy. “Where you going to take me?”

“None of your business! Is it any of your business?” The fellow thrust the muzzle of a revolver into Stacy’s face.

“N—n—n—no! It isn’t any of my business,” chattered the boy. He was thrown astride the horse; then his captor mounted in front of him, and Stacy clung to the fellow’s shirt with the tips of his fingers.

It was an awful ride, Stacy slipping from side to side with each gallop of the mount, the perspiration streaming down his face from his efforts and the nervous strain.

The ride continued for what seemed hours; then the horseman having halted uttered a sharp, short whistle, which, being answered, he rode ahead. Two men with rifles loomed out of the darkness and peered up at the riders.

“Got him?”

“Yes. Where’s the other one?”

“In the shack. We don’t want to put this one there. They mustn’t get close enough together to talk. We’ll put him in the trough.”

The trough! Stacy began having visions of a ducking in cold mountain water, which thought made him shiver. He was forcibly removed from the horse and made to walk, with a cold hand at the back of his neck. He was taken but a short distance from the horse, then, after his feet had been tied and the arm bonds tightened, Chunky was rolled into what, at home, would have been called a ditch. Here, it was a narrow channel that had been cut through the rocks by water. This was the “trough,” and Stacy was left alone there, while his captors walked away.

It was not long after their departure that he heard excited voices. They were hurrying towards him.

“Hey, you feller there!”

“Well, what do you want?” growled the boy in the “trough.”

“He’s all right. I hope the boys kotch the rest of ’em. Don’t make no difference whether it’s dead or alive so long as we’ve got two of ’em.”

Stacy pricked up his ears at this. He wondered to whom they referred.

“Come out of that!” ordered one of the men.

"I can't fall up. Take me out if you want me."

Stacy was yanked from the "trough" with far from gentle hands, his bonds were removed, and he was permitted to walk, guarded by the men. Some little distance from the "trough" they rounded a rock and came upon a small campfire, near which sat two other men, and rough, hard-faced men they were. They eyed him with menacing eyes. Stacy did not like the looks of them.

"Who be ye?" demanded one of the two by the fire.

"Name's Brown. Who are you?"

"What you doing up in these woods?"

"Riding for my health, but it's the most unhealthy place I ever got into."

"Know anything 'bout a diary that a fellow named Petersen—a hoss thief—got robbed of by one of your party?"

"My party never robbed anybody," objected Stacy indignantly.

"Shut up! Answer me."

"How can I answer you and shut up at the same time?"

The man addressed sprang up and struck the fat boy with the flat of his hand and Stacy toppled over.

"You're a coward! A miserable sneak—"

Whack! A second slap laid the boy flat on the ground again. He got up, red of face and raging within.

“If I had a gun you wouldn’t dare do that, you ruffian!”

“Here’s a gun,” answered the bandit, thrusting a revolver towards the Overland boy.

Stacy shrugged his shoulders, but did not take the weapon.

“I—I don’t like to hurt anyone. I—I—I have an aversion to taking human life, and if I were to take that weapon I’m afraid I might forget myself and shoot someone,” stammered the fat boy.

The bandits laughed.

“Called your bluff, didn’t I?” sneered the fellow.

“No. I said if I had a gun you wouldn’t dare do that. Not having a gun I suppose you can do as you like—this time.”

“Sit down thar. I want you to write a letter to your folks back there and tell them that they got to leave the book that one of ’em stole from Petersen, and the bag of gold, too, under a stone on top of the rock behind the camp, and then git out.”

“You mean that I can go then—after I have written the note?” questioned the boy with a hopeful note in his voice.

"I didn't say nothing of the kind."

"Then I won't write it!" declared Stacy with emphasis.

Another whack from the bandit's ham-like paw sent the boy staggering.

"Listen, young feller. This ain't no joke. Whether or not you go back at all ain't worrying me, but I'll tell you this much. You write that letter and say in it that if your folks don't do as you tell them to, we're going to shoot you to-morrow. Mebby we'll do it anyway, and that's what's coming to you if you don't write. Will you write the letter?"

"I'll write it," agreed the fat boy. "Give me something to write with." Stacy labored over that letter, and his forehead and face were wet with perspiration while he was doing it. If he failed to convey the message, he believed the bandits really would make way with him, and if the Overlanders did not obey the order of the bandits, he was positive the bandits would carry out their threat. For these reasons Stacy Brown took more care in composing that letter than he had ever done before in writing a letter.

It was this message that, some time later, landed in the camp of the Overlanders on the flaming arrow, shot to them by a half-breed Indian.

“Read it,” commanded the bandit.

Stacy did, whereupon the bandits with heads close together read it over laboriously, one holding the message close to the fire for better light. The one who appeared to be the leader handed it to a companion.

“See that the ‘squaw-man’ pushes that through by the air road,” he ordered. “It’s got to go through in a hurry or somebody’ll suffer. Git!”

“Cap’n!” cried a voice, and a man dashed around the corner of the rock that protected the bandits. “He’s gone! He’s vamoosed. Don’t know how, but some varmint cut the ropes and let him out.”

“Gone! Go after him, men! What are you standing ’round here for? Get him, dead or alive! Nail that boy first! Never mind, I’ll do it. I’ll—!” The bandit paused suddenly and a blank look appeared on his face. “Whe—whe—where is he?”

Stacy Brown was not there. He had taken advantage of the interruption, and bounded away.

“You need a change, Stacy Brown, and you’re going to have it, if your legs hold out,” growled the boy as he bounded away into the forest.

CHAPTER XXII

A STRANGE VISITOR

“**E**MMMA’S hit!” wailed Nora, as the girls sprang up at Emma Dean’s cry and the tumble that they saw her take.

“Get down!” commanded Tom Gray.
“You’ll be hit.”

Not one of the three girls gave heed to his warning. Elfreda, Grace and Nora ran to the spot at which they had seen Emma pitch forward.

Elfreda was the first to reach her. Emma lay moaning, both hands pressed to her right cheek.

“Where were you hit, dear?” questioned Miss Briggs with no trace of excitement in her voice.

“In my cheek. I thi—think the bullet went clear through.”

“If it had you wouldn’t be talking to me now. Take your hand away, please,” directed Elfreda.

Emma would not do so, so Grace stretched forth a hand and forcibly removed Emma’s

hand from her face. A red blotch on the cheek with a small white center were the only indications that something really had hit the girl. Elfreda examined the spot, and a smile rippled over her face.

“You poor child! No bullet even grazed you, but something did sting you,” announced Elfreda. “I think it is a bee sting. Did you feel stings anywhere else?”

“Yes. On the other cheek, but not so bad there,” gasped Emma. “That’s why I thought the bullet had gone through.”

“This is one instance in your life when you should have demonstrated,” declared Miss Briggs. “You see how easy it is to imagine things, and suffer because you imagine.”

Emma sat up and smiled.

The shooting was still going on from the borders of the meadow, though the firing was not so rapid as before, both sides apparently sparing their ammunition, but enough shots were being fired to make it most uncomfortable for the Overlanders who were directly in line of the firing between the two opposing forces.

Tom joined the girls and led them to a safer place behind some huge boulders, where he sternly ordered them to remain until he gave them permission to change positions. Tom, rifle in hand, then crept out to a place where

he could get a better view of what was going on. As he reached a point of vantage a double blast of fire overhead greeted him; then the firing ceased altogether.

It was then that the Overlander discovered a man creeping around the far end of the meadow. Then he saw another man creeping out from the opposite side of the field, and realized that the two men were stalking each other.

“Keep low, girls!” he called softly. “Something is coming off here if I’m not mistaken.”

Instead of keeping low four heads quickly bobbed up from behind the boulders. At first the girls saw nothing unusual; then they discovered what Tom had just seen. They could see both men at intervals as the men’s heads came up.

“Girls!” Grace snatched her field glasses and directed them at the creeping man on their side of the meadow.

“Wha—what is it?” cried Nora.

“The Peanut Man—it’s Jim Haley! There—see!” She passed her glasses to Elfreda who took a long look.

“You are right, Grace. What does it mean?”

“That we have friends here, J. Elfreda, but I fear something terrible is going to happen. Look!”

The two men had seen each other as their heads were cautiously raised above the tall grass, and both exchanged shots with their revolvers at identically the same second. Then they both ducked back to the protection of the meadow grass.

Jim Haley was on his feet a few seconds later.

“Come out, you sneaking cur!” he shouted. “Stand up like a man!”

The taunt was too much for Haley’s adversary. The fellow leaped to his feet, and, as he leaped, he fired. So did Haley. Neither scored, and, so far as the Overlanders could observe, not a human being except themselves saw the duel that was being fought out there in the meadow. Haley’s adversary ducked, and the Overlanders saw what his strategy was. A slight waving of the grass told them that the fellow was crawling to the left. They did not know whether or not Haley saw that.

A moment or so later the man again sprang up and fired, but the Peanut Man had not been deceived. His revolver banged so quickly that the watchers could not tell which man fired first.

“Good for Jim Haley!” cried Tom Gray.

“Don’t!” admonished Grace. “Tom, don’t forget that this may end in a tragedy.”

“That’s what it is going to end in—perhaps

more than one tragedy. When Haley and the other fellow wind up you will see more lively work, and—”

“Hippy! Oh, where is my Hippy?” cried Nora.

“Don’t worry. He has gone to join some of the men who are backing Haley,” replied Tom.

Neither Haley nor his opponent ducked after that and to the Overland girls, terrible as it was, it was a wonderful thing to see the two men standing up in the meadow shooting at each other as calmly as though they were firing at targets.

Emma Dean’s face was pale, and her whole body was trembling with excitement.

A little cry from one of the girls greeted a new move on the part of Haley’s antagonist. The fellow suddenly whipped out another revolver, and began shooting with both guns at the same time.

Jim Haley demonstrated that he, too, could do that, and he did, and the bullets flew thick and fast. Then suddenly they saw Haley’s enemy spin half way around.

“He’s hit!” cried Nora.

The man was hit, and Haley held his fire. But the Peanut Man’s adversary came back with two more shots, both of which grazed Haley’s body. Then, like a flash, Jim Haley

fired two shots at the same instant. His adversary turned slowly and then pitched sideways to the ground.

Haley himself went down almost as suddenly, the difference being that Haley was not hurt, but he knew what to expect after his adversary had fallen seriously wounded.

The crash of rifles was heard on the opposite side of the meadow, but there was no reply from the Overland side.

“Where are they? Oh, where are Hippy and the people he is with?” cried Nora.

“I think they are on the other side of the meadow among the trees, creeping toward their enemies,” answered Grace Harlowe. “Two parties are shooting over on that side now.”

“Yes,” answered Tom. “You have it right, Grace. The Peanut Man offered himself as a possible sacrifice to enable his companions to work around to the other side of the meadow and attack the enemy on their own ground.”

“But where is Mr. Haley? Are you sure that he wasn’t hit?” begged Emma.

“No. I could see by the way he went down that it was to avoid the volley that he knew would be fired at him,” Tom informed them. “Girls, I am in hopes that this morning’s work may mark the finish of the job that certain men have been sent up here to accomplish.”

“I don’t understand,” said Elfreda, interested at once.

“You will later,” was Captain Gray’s non-committal answer.

“Should we move from here, Tom?” questioned Grace a little apprehensively. “The firing has stopped.”

“No. We must wait here. That is the arrangement, no matter which way the fight goes. We must be on our guard, so get your rifles and sit down behind the boulders, while I keep watch here.”

The Overland party obeyed, but not willingly. They had come out from their hiding place to watch the duel, and preferred not to miss further operations, but Tom was insistent.

It was well past noon when a loud hello brought the girls to their feet. The call was uttered by Hippy.

“I had an awful time getting here without crossing the meadow. I didn’t know what I might run into out there, so I came around through the forest, and it was mighty rough going. Got anything loose around here?” he demanded.

“Saddle rations; that is all,” replied Grace. “Help yourself to whatever you can find.”

“Oh, Hippy, have you seen anything of Hamilton?” begged Emma anxiously.

“Yes. Why?”

“Is—is he all right?”

“He was beating up Hawk Murray with his fists and doing it beautifully, the last I saw of him,” answered Hippy. “Never saw a fellow with a better punch than ‘Hamilton,’ as you call him, has.”

“Hippy, what about the man out there in the meadow?” asked Miss Briggs. “I am going out there. He may not be dead, and it is inhuman to leave him there to suffer, even if he is an enemy. Who is he? Do you know, Hippy?”

“Yes. That fellow is Two-gun Murray, the slickest man with a revolver that ever hunched a shoulder, and you will please stay away from him.”

“Tom,” said Grace, laying a hand on her husband’s arm, “I wish someone *would* go out there. Perhaps it isn’t wise that any of us girls should do so, but we are not afraid, if you will permit. Please!”

“Come along, Hippy. I guess it is up to us,” urged Captain Gray.

Hippy protested that he must have food, but Nora promised that, if he would go out, she would have a nice meal ready for him when he returned, so the two men, with drawn revolvers, walked out cautiously to the spot where the

mountain bandit had fallen. He was not at the exact spot where he had fallen, but they had no difficulty in following the trail which he had left.

They found Two-gun alive, but unconscious, and a few moments later they were on their way back to camp, carrying the heavy burden. The Overland girls, knowing that the man was still alive because Tom and Hippy were carrying him so carefully, were ready with water, bandages and antiseptics, to give first aid.

“Where is he hit?” was Elfreda’s first question.

“Both shoulders,” answered Tom briefly.

Grace and Elfreda began working on the bandit immediately, and in half an hour he regained consciousness. The girls found that Two-gun was seriously wounded, both bullets having gone through him. They said that he should be taken to some place where surgical aid might be had, but Tom said that was impossible. All that could be done had been done. Further, he said that men of his type were fairly well used to being shot up. No vital spot had been hit and both Tom and Hippy were of the opinion that Two-gun would live to spend at least a few years in prison. This bandit, however, probably had never before enjoyed the really tender treatment such as the girls

were giving him. He followed Elfreda's every movement with his eyes.

"I—I didn't tell on you—about the saddle and the hoss," he said weakly.

"I know it," answered Miss Briggs. "That is one reason why I am trying to take good care of you. But you must be quiet and conserve your strength."

"Who was the fellow that got me?" demanded Two-gun.

"That I cannot tell you, Mr. Murray," replied Elfreda.

"He was some handy with the gun, I'll say, Miss."

Elfreda moved away from Two-gun, and asked anxiously if any word had been had of Stacy. None had. She then suggested to Tom that the wounded bandit might be able to give them information that would lead to finding Stacy, so Tom asked Two-gun if he knew of Stacy's whereabouts. The bandit shook his head. He said he knew that two members of the Overland party had been captured, but that he had not learned what had become of the prisoners.

"There is one of them," Captain Gray informed him, pointing to Hippy. "Were both men taken to the same place?"

"They might have been," was the reply,

and that was all that could be elicited from Two-gun Murray.

There was nothing now to be done save to wait until the men, who had tricked the bandits and saved the Overlanders from probable serious consequences, advised them what to do; so the party made themselves as comfortable as possible, sleeping part of the time and taking turns at watching the camp and Two-gun Murray.

At night their vigil was redoubled, for none knew how many of Two-gun's companions were at large. They knew that some had been captured, as Hippy Wingate had told them so, and that Ham White had had a fist fight with Hawk Murray, the leader of the band of marauders that had terrified the entire Cascade Range.

It was well after midnight when the camp was hailed. Tom answered the hail.

"Come forward with your hands up and identify yourself," he ordered.

"Yeow!" howled a voice that brought every member of the Overland party to his feet.

"Stacy!" shouted the Overlanders.

"Wha—what!" exclaimed Tom Gray as an Indian loped into camp, a rifle in his hand, which he kept pointed in the direction of Captain Gray.

CHAPTER XXIII

A THRILLING DISCOVERY

“**M**E Cat-foot Charlie. Me come!”

“Yes. He’s the cat and I’m the foot,” answered another voice, and Stacy Brown strolled into camp with his chest thrown out. “I’ve been captured, sentenced to death, and, being the foot, I did some fast footwork, and here I am. Old chap Pussy here found me and brought me back. Oh, no, I wasn’t lost. I never know where I am, anyway. He showed me the way. Who—”

“Our sweet dreams of peace are now at an end,” complained Emma.

Stacy did not heed her words nor the congratulations of his companions who were happier than words could express to have him with them again. The fat boy was interested in the man who lay by the fire.

“Who’s that?” he demanded.

“His name is Murray,” answered Lieutenant Wingate. “He and Jim Haley fought a duel to-day, and Two-gun—that is the man’s name—got a bit the worst of it.”

“Two-gun Murray! Hey, you! I’m wise to you. You’re the fellow that stole my fish—the same person that I clouted over the head. You say he is wounded, Uncle Hip?”

“Yes, seriously so.”

“Think it would do much harm if I were to give him another wallop over the head—just for luck, you know?”

“Stacy!” Tom Gray’s voice was stern. “Get away from that man and let him alone!”

“Oh, all right, but I would like to give him just one clout. It’s coming to him.”

Captain Gray took firm hold of the fat boy’s collar and projected him to some distance from the wounded man.

“Cat-foot, have you word for me?” demanded Tom.

The Indian grunted and handed Tom a message. It was from Hamilton White, and the smile that lighted up the captain’s face as he read it, told the Overland Riders that it contained good news.

“We are to move as soon as we can pack up,” announced Tom. “Cat-foot will accompany us.” That was all Captain Gray would say.

Emma, whose curiosity was proverbial, pouted and complained that every one of the party seemed to think it smart to make a mystery of everything.

After offering the Indian food, which he refused and sat down by himself, the Overlanders quizzed Stacy about what had happened to him. Stacy told what he knew of his capture, and of the incidents that followed. In the course of the conversation it developed that Cat-foot Charlie had been sent to pick up the fat boy's trail and follow it until he found him. Hamilton White had brought that about.

Cat-foot had gone to the scene of Hippy's imprisonment and from there soon found Stacy's trail. This was made the easier because he had eavesdropped on two of the bandits and learned how Stacy got away.

"Fat boy, him run like Indian chased by bad spirits," announced the Indian when asked about the chase.

Stacy, it developed, discovered that the Indian was chasing him, and from that moment on it was a race, the frightened Overlander making top speed to drop his pursuer. The race ended when Cat-foot finally overtook him, leaped on the boy's back, and held him until he had explained what he wanted. Stacy's courage thereupon returned.

"Our fallen hero," observed Emma when the tale was finished.

"Yes, but I didn't get shot," retorted Stacy. The Overlanders laughed heartily at Stacy's

retort, for it was a rap at Emma, though the boy did not know it. He laughed with them just the same.

“Where are we going?” Nora wanted to know.

“Northwest,” answered Tom briefly. “You will know all about it within twenty-four hours. The question is, what are we to do with our wounded man. We surely can’t leave him here. Cat-foot, do you know this fellow?”

“Me know.”

“What do you think we had better do with him?”

“Shoot um!” was the prompt reply of the Indian.

“Pussy, you are a man of rare judgment,” complimented Stacy, grinning at the Indian.

“It is what one would expect from one savage to another,” murmured Emma.

“What did the Chief say about it?” demanded Tom. “I mean Mr. White.”

“Chief say me stay. Men come git Two-gun.”

“Why do you call Hamilton the Chief?” wondered Emma.

“How many of the bandits did they get?” questioned Tom, ignoring Emma’s inquiry.

“Not know.”

“Very well, I will turn Two-gun over to

you, but, Cat-foot, if you do one little thing to disturb that man you will have to answer to me. When he asks for a drink, give it to him and say nothing—say nothing at all to him at any time unless he wants something. You also will be held responsible for his not getting away, and after the men take him, unless you get different orders from the Chief, you will come to us at Three Mile Pass. That's all, except that we will leave food for you and Two-gun."

At Tom's direction all hands began packing, making ready for another night journey. Stacy complained bitterly, saying he hadn't had a night's sleep in so long that his eyelids hung down over his cheeks.

"Where are we going, anyway?" he wanted to know.

"Three-Mile Pass, you heard me say. Do you know where that is?" returned Captain Gray.

"No. Do you?"

Tom said he had a fair idea of its location. Though tired and somewhat nervous, the Overland girls prepared for the journey with their usual cheerfulness, and were under way in an hour. Tom selected an unsuspected pass as the route from the meadow, and the riders were soon swallowed up in its deep gloom. It seemed

as though night had poured the blackest of her coloring into this pass, but the trail was fairly smooth and one could not stray from it without bumping into the rocks.

No halt was made until daylight. Then the party stopped for breakfast, and, while there, horses were heard approaching. The girls were startled, and looked to Tom for orders, but Captain Gray merely smiled.

"Don't worry; only some guests for breakfast," he said.

"It's Hamilton!" cried Emma Dean, as two horsemen rode into sight.

"And the Peanut Man," added Nora joyously.

"Put over a fresh pot of coffee," suggested Grace. "They look tired, and goodness knows one, at least, has a right to be tired."

"Peanuts, peanuts, ladies and gentlemen!" called Jim Haley. "The International product has reached to the utmost limits of the Cascades already, and will soon be over the border. Howdy, folks!"

It was a real welcome that the Overlanders gave the two men. Elfreda and Grace were studying the face of Haley, with the same thought in the mind of each. Could this care-free, temperamental Haley be the Haley that they had seen facing the bandit gunman calmly,

never flinching under the bandit's fire, and in the end downing his man? It did not seem possible.

"How did you make out with your patient?" he asked, his face suddenly assuming a grave expression as he shook hands with Miss Briggs.

"His wounds were serious, but, if he is not neglected, I think he will pull through."

"He will not be neglected where he is going," was the significant reply. "The officers have taken him away from your last camp by now, so don't worry. After a snack we will have a talk all around."

The breakfast from then on was a happy reunion, and even Elfreda Briggs forgot to be distant towards Hamilton White. Emma managed to sit beside him, her face wearing a most devoted look.

When the dishes had been put away, the party settled down to talk over their experiences, and after a little Tom Gray cleared his throat and announced that he had something to say.

"You Overlanders have accused some of us of all the time making a mystery of everything. While clearing myself, there are others present whom I wish to clear of any suspicion of doing other than their duty.

"Here are the facts: When I came up here

with my wife and her party, I was supposed to come as a forester, but as a matter of fact I came on quite another mission. For a long time tourists and others have been preyed upon by mountain bandits, the Guerrillas of the Cascades, as some call them. As a forester here for a survey it was thought that I might get a line, so to speak, on the gang and its lair without them suspecting me. I did that to a certain extent. Then, too, there was a famous government forester who came to Washington State on the same mission. He thought he could best look over the ground by joining out with a party of tourists, and he was unfortunate enough to fall in with the Overland Riders. That man knew these forests and mountains, and, after finishing this particular mission, he is to be the chief of the foresters, which, in fact, he is already."

"Hamilton White!" cried Nora.

Tom Gray nodded.

"And he has done his work well. In addition to that he has been a wonderful guide and a delightful companion to you folks."

"Even if he did deceive us," said Elfreda.

"Not all of us," spoke up Grace, who then told of the wigwagging incident when she learned that he was the chief of the foresters through doing some signaling on her own account.

Ham White laughed heartily.

"I suspected something of the sort," he added with a chuckle.

"To continue my story," resumed Captain Gray, "another man came to us sailing under false colors, if you wish to call it that. This man proposed that the Overlanders be used as a decoy to lure the bandits on, knowing that the ruffians believed one of our party possessed the key to Sam Petersen's gold find. Ham White objected to subjecting us to peril, but when the newcomer showed him orders from the Washington authorities directing White to coöperate fully with him and carry out his orders, White was obliged to obey."

The eyes of the Overland Riders turned toward Jim Haley, who actually grew rosy under their accusing gaze.

"Don't look at me that way. I confess, but you shall have your peanuts just the same," he promised laughingly.

"Folks, know Jim Haley, chief of the special agents," introduced Tom. "Between White and Haley the entire band of guerrillas, with one exception, has been rounded up. Some are on their way to stand trial, others are being conveyed to a hospital to be treated for their wounds, and two are dead. They have spied on this party, watched their every move ever

since they came into the Washington forests, and especially so since Sam Petersen died from a gunshot wound inflicted by one of the Murrays."

"How perfectly thrilling!" breathed Emma Dean.

"The big round-up came yesterday when the bandits were preparing to make a mass attack on our camp, but Haley outwitted them. They did not know that a body of forest rangers and sheriff's deputies were secreted on your side of the meadow, ready not only to defend you, but to capture the ruffians who were about to try to take you and force information from you. It was Haley who, as you know, went out to meet Two-gun Murray, and beat him in a stand-up gun duel," said Tom.

"Captain! Please talk about the weather," begged Haley amid laughter.

"They didn't find out about the gold mine after all, did they?" chuckled Hippy. "Say, Haley, I know you, you old rascal! You're the fellow with a cold who rescued me from the bandits," he accused, and Haley agreed with a nod.

"Speaking of gold, Hippy Wingate," spoke up Elfreda Briggs, "I think I am entitled to an explanation. How did you chance to have my bag of gold in your possession?"

“Ham White gave it to me, and told me to hang onto it—that it wasn’t safe for you to carry it around.”

“Indeed!”

“I took it from the bunk where Petersen lay, before you came in the shack that day. I expected that the gang would return, so I scraped up some pebbles and substituted them for the gold, replacing the canvas bag where I found it,” explained Ham White.

“Was it you who exchanged shots with Two-gun Murray that day?” she asked.

Ham nodded, and Elfreda bent an accusing glance on Stacy Brown.

“Well, I saved you from that ruffian, didn’t I?” protested the fat boy.

“Yes, Stacy, and I forgive you for trying to make me think you had suffered the bandit to shoot at you while you lay behind a bush,” smiled Elfreda.

“Not if my legs were in good working order. I wouldn’t lie behind any bush or anything else and let a sure-thing gunman blaze away at me,” declared Stacy Brown with an earnestness that raised a merry peal of laughter.

“Time to break camp,” announced Tom Gray. “We can chatter after we have made a new camp, which will not be many miles from here.”

“Where are we bound for?” asked Hippy.

“Three Mile Pass.” Captain Gray’s face wore a broad smile, and Grace, knowing him so well, regarded him suspiciously.

“Tom has something up his sleeve,” Grace confided in Elfreda.

“They all have,” observed Miss Briggs. “These honest men who have opened their hearts to us have not yet opened the aforesaid hearts far enough.”

“Boots and saddles!” cried Hippy, and the Overland Riders with their guests took to their mounts. It was a happy ride that morning; the air was cool, birds were twittering, and Hippy was trying to sing, his efforts in that direction raising a perfect storm of protest.

No stop was made, except now and then to water the horses, until nearly noon. Then they halted, apparently for no cause at all, the visitors and Tom Gray fussing with saddle girths, all the time regarded narrowly by Grace and Elfreda.

At last they started on through a rapidly broadening pass, following the dry course of a mountain stream. The sunlight flooded the pass as their trail bore more to the right, and at the turn Tom Gray held up his hand, a signal to halt.

“Oh, look at the Old Lady of the Mountain!”

yelled Stacy. "Yes, she's got a kid on either side of her. Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed.

"Elfreda!" Grace gripped the arm of her companion. "'Lost River—Grandma and the Children—Three Peaks dead east.' Look! There are the peaks. The sun is at the meridian. Oh, Elfreda!"

"And look—the yellow sands of Lost River. Oh, Grace! If it should be only a dream I'd faint, after all I have been through to get here. See! The old lady's face is black as ink, just as that poor, unhappy old prospector said it was."

"Children, do you know where you are?" called Captain Gray, none of the party having heard the exclamations of Grace and Elfreda.

"Yes, Tom Gray. I am sitting on my gold mine," answered Miss Briggs, trying to control her voice and keep her elation out of it.

"Why, Elfreda! I thought you did not want a gold mine—that you wished to hear nothing more about the hateful subject," chided Grace.

"I think I—I have the fever, and—" confessed Elfreda.

"You are in fact sitting on your gold mine. When I learned that Lost River was at the feet of Grandma and the Children, with Three Peaks dead east, I recognized the description instantly, for I had been here, and was im-

pressed with the odd formations to be seen here," said Captain Gray. "You will recall the words of the old prospector in the diary and on the sheet on which you wrote down what he told you. I was here trying to locate the headquarters of the Murrays, and, for your information, we are less than half a mile from the lair of the Guerrillas of the Cascades—the Murrays. Such is the irony of fate," added Tom.

"Gold! Hooray!" yelled Stacy, tossing his hat into the air. "I hope it doesn't turn out to be iron."

"Please don't get excited," admonished Grace. "We are not certain that there is any gold here."

"Any gold here?" answered Tom. "Ham, tell them what you know."

"Mrs. Gray, when I left you so mysteriously I came up here at Captain Gray's direction to make a thorough survey—to find out, if possible, if Petersen's was an idle dream or the real thing. It was real! I have already panned enough of the sand of Lost River through my fingers to make a fair meal ticket for this party. It is true that we have not found the real vein, but we know it cannot be far from here, and we are going to search for it."

"Say! Whose gold mine is this?" demanded Lieutenant Hippy Wingate.

“Whose? Why, Miss Briggs’, of course,” answered Ham White. “I have sent a trusty ranger to Seattle to file her claim, which we have staked out broadly, and we are in hopes that it may take in the mother lode. In any event, we are on the ground, and we will broaden our claim so that you may be protected. Am I forgiven for all the deception I have practiced on you and Miss Briggs and the others?” asked White, addressing Grace.

“It is for us to ask your pardon, Mr. White, for suspecting that you were not what you seemed, or so it seemed to us at one time.”

Stacy had leaped from his horse and was digging feverishly in the sands of Lost River.

“I got one! Whoopee!” he howled, holding up a “nugget” nearly as big as an egg.

Hippy snatched the “nugget” from him and turned it over in his hand, then broke into uproarious laughter.

“Why, you simp! That’s not a nugget, it is merely a piece of quartz. Dig some more, Chunky.”

“I suggest that we do not lose our heads, and that we make camp and behave,” cried Grace.

The Overlanders agreed, and in the happiest frame of mind they dismounted and pitched their camp, after which they walked over the

claim with Tom, Mr. White and Haley as guides. On the way up the channel of the dry stream Nora picked up three small nuggets of real gold.

"The luck of the Irish, me darlin'," cried Nora, playfully patting Hippy on the cheek.

"I wish it understood," announced Elfreda after their return to camp, "that this is not Elfreda Briggs' claim, but the Overland Riders' claim."

"Too late," answered Tom. "Your claim will be filed before you or anyone else can stop it."

"I will see about that," murmured Elfreda.

That evening, by the campfire, the members of the party discussed their good fortune, and made plans for the future.

Busy days followed, some of the party panning the sands of Lost River for gold, and finding enough to arouse them to a high pitch of excitement. There was no thought of continuing the journey, for there was work to be done where they were. A mining expert had been sent for, and his investigations were still in progress five weeks later when Grace asked Tom to take her home.

Jim Haley had not remained long with them, for he, too, had work to do in connection with evidence against the captured bandits.

The others of the party decided that they would return with Grace, but Ham White, at Miss Briggs' request, together with three former forest rangers, remained on the claim to guard and work it, and assist in locating, if possible, the rich vein that all believed could not be far away.

"You are all coming to see us next winter at Haven Home," reminded Grace on the morning of their departure for Cresco, where they were to board a train for the east—and Home! "It probably will be along about Christmas time, that being the most joyous season for old friends to get together, and we will have a Christmas tree and everything," she added, laughing.

Good byes were said and the Overland Riders retraced their trail, the last journey that, as a body, they probably ever would take. A week later found them at their homes. Each had his own life to lead now, for the years were drawing on, and the Overlanders were no longer children.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

HAVEN HOME was brilliantly lighted, for it was Christmas eve, and Grace had made good her promise to ask the Overland Riders to spend the holiday week with her and Tom.

Haven Home was a house of happiness on that wonderful Christmas eve, for, up in the nursery, lay a little pink and white bundle of humanity over which the Overlanders bent—that is, the girls did—and worshiped at the shrine of Grace Harlowe's own little daughter, now less than four weeks old. For that bit of humanity the whole party had come laden with gifts, not forgetting many beautiful things for Yvonne, Grace's adopted daughter—the child that Grace had rescued from the cellar of a deserted village amid the crashing of exploding German shells in the great world war—now a beautiful young woman.

Hamilton White was there, big, brown and manly, a figure that attracted attention wherever he went; Jim Haley was there, too, with

a load of peanuts that required a wagon to carry them from the express office.

Elfreda had brought her adopted daughter, now home from a finishing school, and a different child she was from the daughter of the Mad Hermit that the Overlanders had taken to their hearts some years before.

But where was Stacy Brown? No one could answer the question. Stacy had not even replied to the invitation to join the Christmas party, and there was disappointment, for no reunion of the Overlanders could be complete without the fat boy.

Emma Dean was monopolizing "Hamilton" most of the time, and Nora confided to Grace that she actually believed it was going to be a "match," but Grace shook her head and smiled.

And then Stacy arrived!

The fat boy made his usual dramatic entrance at a moment when he knew attention would be centered on him. It was.

Stacy was in full evening dress, carrying an opera hat, which he crushed and popped open with one hand as he shook hands and bowed with a grace that was unsuspected by his companions.

"Did you stop at the hotel to get into those glad rags?" demanded Hippy.

"We wondered why you were so late," said

Grace. "It never occurred to us that you would stop to dress before coming up to the house. Why, if you felt that you must dress, did you not come here? Your room has been ready for several days."

"Dress? Who said I stopped to dress? I dressed this morning before leaving home."

"Stacy!" cried Nora in a horrified tone.

"Well?"

"You don't mean that you wore your evening clothes all day on the train?" demanded Nora.

"Sure I did. I didn't want to put them in my suit case and wrinkle them all up, so I wore them. Anything wrong about that?"

There was silence for a few seconds, then the Overlanders broke out in peals of laughter.

"Say, I want to see the kid. *He* won't laugh at me, I'll bet," said Stacy.

"Wrong gender, young man," observed Hippy.

"Of course you shall see him," cried Grace, linking her arm in Stacy's and leading him upstairs, with the entire Overland party following.

Two little blue eyes looked up at him as Stacy gazed, and popped his crush hat at the bundle of pink and white until the nurse took it away from him indignantly.

“The perfect picture of Grace, isn’t she?” bubbled Emma.

“Oh, I don’t know. Cute little monkey, isn’t she?”

“Young man, you come downstairs,” ordered Hippy, collaring Stacy and leading him away, while the Overlanders followed laughing. The merriment had begun with the arrival of Stacy.

Dinner was announced as they reached the drawing room, and it was a dinner that Stacy Brown did full justice to. It did the Overlanders’ hearts good to see him eat.

“How you ever managed to develop such an appetite, short of starvation, is a thing that I have many times wondered at,” teased Tom.

“Develop it! I didn’t. It’s a gift,” was the fat boy’s quick response. “I was born with it, and I don’t know why you folks are always making fun of me,” he retorted, appearing to be very much hurt.

“That is because you are always making fun of yourself,” reminded Emma.

“Not when you are about,” mumbled Stacy. And so the merriment went on.

At the close of the dinner Hamilton White made his mine report. The mother lode of “Lost Mine” had just recently been tapped when work was suspended for the winter, to be resumed in the early spring, he said. The min-

ing engineer in charge of the work was authority for the statement that it would undoubtedly pan out a big fortune. White said he had the expert's detailed report which they could look over at their leisure.

"So J. Elfreda is a rich woman, eh?" said Stacy, regarding her solemnly.

"Yes, rich in the sense that I have such friends as these," answered Elfreda, her eyes moist as she glanced at the eager, flushed faces about her. "Gold is not riches—friendship is. As for the riches of the 'Lost Mine' I have with me a transfer of title to the property, signed, sealed and delivered, providing as follows:

"One eighth to the new baby.

"One eighth to my adopted daughter 'Little Silver.'

"One eighth to Yvonne.

"One eighth each to Grace, Nora and Emma.

"And—" Elfreda paused, and in a subdued voice added, "one eighth each for myself and for my husband to be." A flush slowly grew into her cheeks as J. Elfreda Briggs bent her eyes on the paper from which she was reading.

"Your—your what?" stammered Nora, as all eyes were fixed on Miss Briggs' face.

"My husband to be!" Elfreda raised her eyes, eyes full of happiness, to her friends. "I am to wed Mr. White in the early spring.

You, my beloved friends, are the first to be told. Why should you not be first?"

"Oh, Hamilton, isn't that perfectly wonderful!" cried Emma.

Emma had broken the ice, the dead silence that, for a few seconds, had followed Elfreda Briggs' announcement, and then the exclamations and the congratulations fairly overwhelmed Elfreda and Hamilton White.

Everything else was forgotten.

"Well, old chappie, what have *you* got to say for *yourself*?" demanded Hippy Wingate, frowning on "Ham" White.

"Only that I am the most fortunate of men," answered Hamilton White gravely.

"Never mind, Emma," spoke up Grace smilingly as she looked into the flushed face of Emma Dean. "I have named the baby—I just now named her, and her name is Emma Grace Harlowe Gray."

"Oh, the poor kid," wailed Stacy. "To go through life with a name like that! My heart of hearts bleeds for her."

"For he's a jolly good fellow," struck up Tom Gray, whereupon Grace ran to her piano and joined with the accompaniment, and the old house resounded to the rollicking song until the nurse came down, her face wearing a deep frown.

“Please, please!” she begged. “You have awakened the baby.”

The song stopped.

“Well, we are all set now except for Stacy Brown and Emma Dean. They are our hopeless bachelors,” declared Hippy.

“Bachelors! I guess not,” retorted Stacy. “Emma and I have decided to tie up, too.”

The Overlanders shouted. They thought it was one of Stacy’s jokes.

Then the Overlanders began to realize that Stacy was not joking.

“But how do you two expect to get along—you are fighting all the time?” wondered Nora.

“The difference between us and some others is that we will have done all our fighting before we were married. Am I right, Emma?”

“Yes, Stacy dear,” replied Emma, blushing furiously.

“When did all this take place?” asked Grace.

“Oh, we got engaged by the correspondence-school plan,” Stacy informed her.

“The idea! Children like you two getting married,” objected Nora.

“Children? Huh! I’m twenty-three, and Emma—” Stacy shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, let her speak for herself. Anything else—anyone got any questions to ask?”

“Yes,” spoke up Elfreda. “If I may do so

without offense, I should like to know what you propose to do after you marry Emma?"

"Nothing!" with rising inflection in his voice. "I have money, my little wife will have more, and we two will live a life of distinguished and elegant leisure."

"You poor turtle doves," chortled Hippy Wingate.

The merry moments that followed failed to soothe the wakeful baby upstairs. After the excitement over the startling announcements had abated, Grace proposed that they dress the Christmas tree, and, following that, they danced for an hour, and the wonderful evening came to a close—for all except Stacy and Emma. The two strolled out on the snow-covered lawn of Haven Home, hand in hand, with the moon beaming down upon them, and a million diamonds sparkling at their feet.

"Stacy dear, do you remember that night up in the North Woods when the Overlanders were preparing to leave for home? Do you remember what Hippy asked me as a snowbird chirped high up in a great tree, just as one is now chirping in that apple tree yonder?" asked Emma.

"I remember," nodded Stacy.

"Hippy asked me, 'Emma, what is the little bird saying to-night?' I answered, 'He is

wishing us all a merry, merry Christmas and a glad, happy new year.' That is what the snowbird is saying to us from the old apple tree to-night, isn't he, Stacy dear?"

"You bet, kid. Wise guys, those snowbirds," he observed as they turned and strolled back towards the house. "We are going to be happy, aren't we, Emma?"

"Going to be? Why, we are happy now, dear. Say good-night to me out here," she whispered as they reached the veranda.

Stacy did so. He said good-night several times before they went indoors. Emma Dean's eyes were bright and her cheeks wore a rosy glow when she faced her companions in the drawing room a moment later.

The Overland Riders smiled. They understood.

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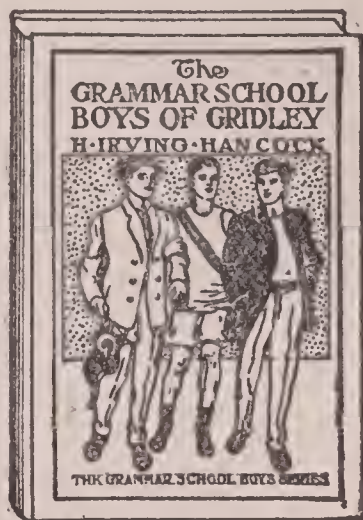
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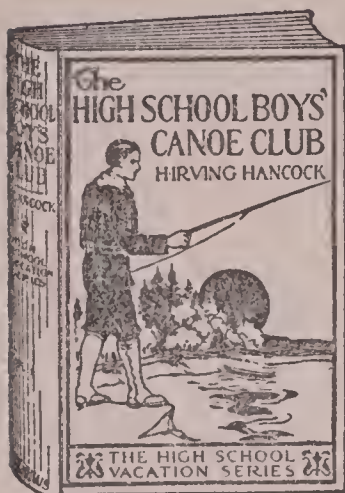
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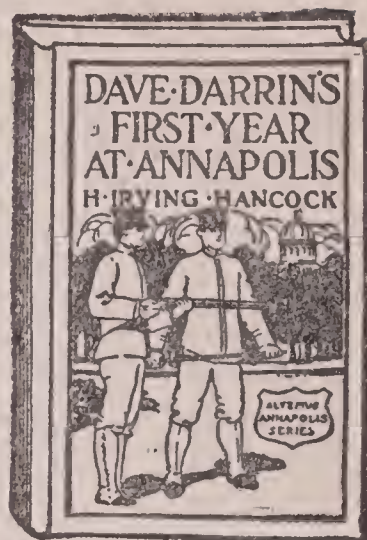
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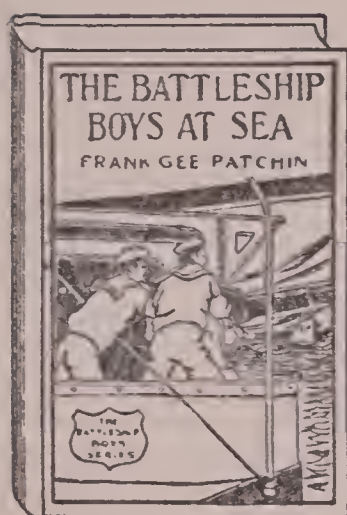
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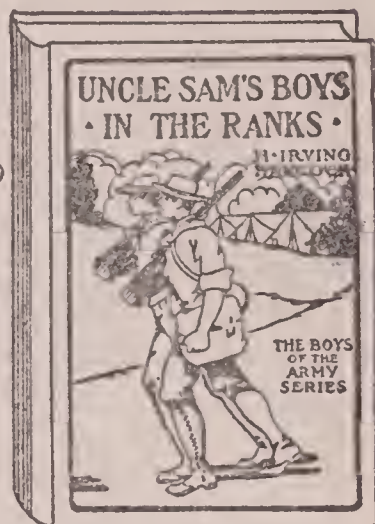
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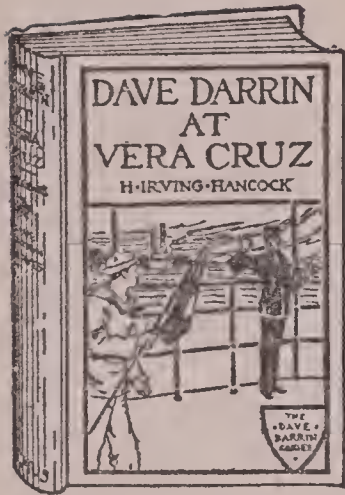


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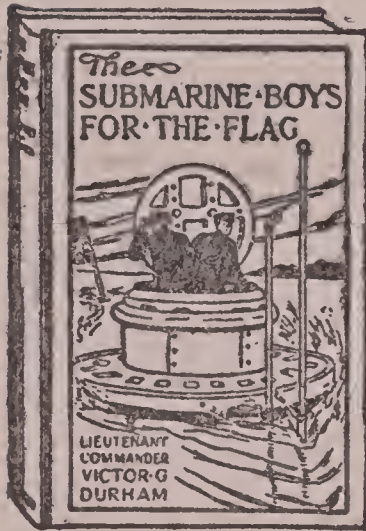


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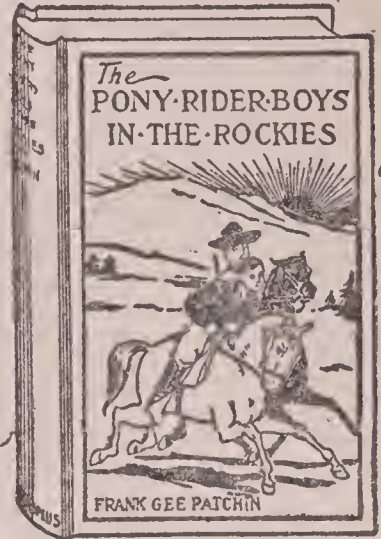
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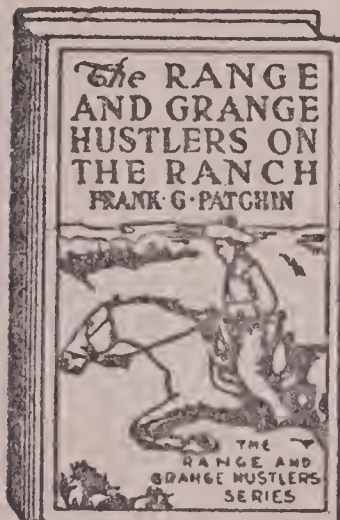


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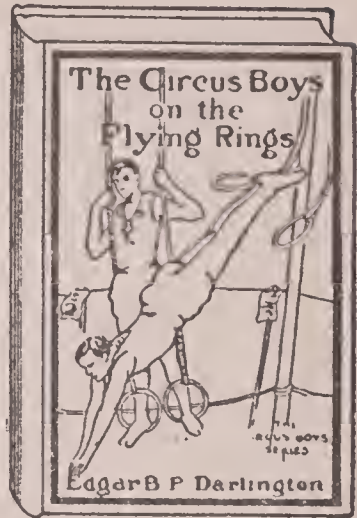
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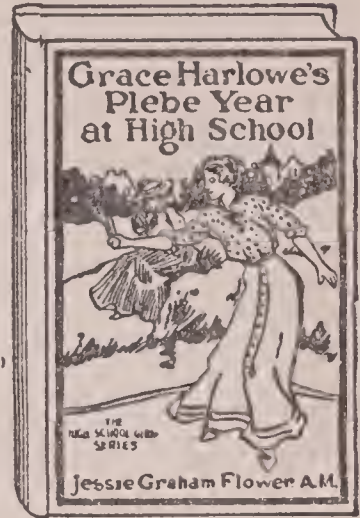
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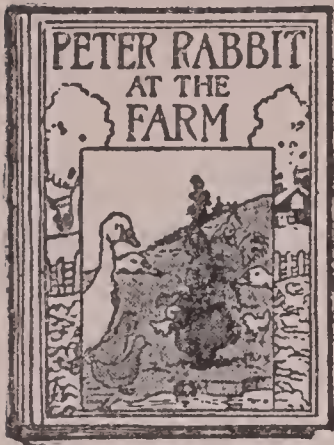
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